



Topic

Philosophy, Religion
& Intellectual History

Subtopic

Ancient Philosophy

Think like a Stoic

Ancient Wisdom for Today's World

Course Guidebook

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The City University of New York





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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	
Professor Biography	i
Course Scope	1
LESSON GUIDES	
Lesson 1	
How to Live like a Stoic Sage	4
Lesson 2	
Stoicism from Heraclitus to Thoreau	10
Lesson 3	
The Stoic Garden: Physics, Ethics, Logic	18
Lesson 4	
How Stoics Understand Providence	25
Lesson 5	
Using Stoic Ethics to Achieve Happiness	33
Lesson 6	
The Stoics on Desire and Discipline	41
Lesson 7	
The Stoics on Interacting with Others	48

Lesson 8	
The Stoics on Decision-Making	55
Lesson 9	
Seneca's Letters to Lucilius	60
Lesson 10	
Seneca on Anger Management	67
Lesson 11	
Seneca on Grief and Distress	74
Lesson 12	
Epictetus on the Importance of Reason	80
Lesson 13	
Epictetus on Overcoming Fear	88
Lesson 14	
Epictetus on Desire, Action, and Judgment	94
Lesson 15	
Epictetus on How to Be Free	101
Lesson 16	
A Manual for the Good Life: <i>The Enchiridion</i>	107
Lesson 17	
Marcus Aurelius on Being Thankful	114
Lesson 18	
Marcus Aurelius, Virtue, and the Vineyard	123

Lesson 19	
Marcus Aurelius on Managing Turmoil	131
Lesson 20	
From Stoic Self-Mastery to Cosmopolitanism	137
Lesson 21	
Drawing Inspiration from Stoic Role Models	144
Lesson 22	
How Stoics Bear Responsibility and Conflict	151
Lesson 23	
Misusing and Misunderstanding Stoicism	157
Lesson 24	
Stoicism for Everyday Life	166
Lesson 25	
Four Family Problems and Stoic Solutions	172

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Bibliography	177
Question Answers	180
Image Credits	186

THINK LIKE A STOIC

ANCIENT WISDOM FOR TODAY'S WORLD

Stoicism is an ancient Greco-Roman philosophy of life that's analogous in its scope to philosophies or religions like Buddhism, Confucianism, or Christianity. It aims at helping people navigate everyday existence and the challenges that it may pose, as well as reflect on the broader meaning and direction of their lives. What should our priorities be? How should we interact with our fellow human beings? How are we to face the inevitable setbacks and finally face our own mortality? These are some of the questions that Stoicism helps us address in the pursuit of what the ancients called a eudaimonic life—that is, a life that is truly worth living.

The course opens with a general introduction to the basics of Stoic philosophy and in particular with an explanation of its main tenet: that we should live according to nature. This means according to human nature, which for the Stoics is the nature of a highly social being capable of reason. It follows that a fulfilling human life is one in which we apply our reasoning abilities to make the world a better place.

The second lesson presents an overview of the history of Stoicism, from its beginnings in the late 4th century BCE through its apex in imperial Rome. You'll then track the lasting influence of Stoic ideas on Christianity and in early modern philosophy, including on influential figures such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, and Baruch Spinoza.

Three lessons explore the three parts of the classic Stoic curriculum, introducing you to the study of “physics,” “logic,” and “ethics.” The reason these terms are in quotation marks is because their ancient meanings were far broader than the contemporary ones. *Physics* meant the study of all the natural sciences and metaphysics—i.e., of how the world works. *Logic* meant the study of anything that might improve our reasoning, including formal logic, epistemology, rhetoric, and what is today called cognitive science. And *ethics* meant not just the study of right and wrong actions but an understanding of how to live one's life. The Stoics taught that in order to live a good life, we should reason correctly about things and act in accordance with a working understanding of how things are.

The three successive lessons bring you into the beginnings of Stoic practice. They are structured around three disciplines, or training regimes, devised by the 2nd-century Stoic philosopher Epictetus: desire, action, and assent. The discipline of desire aims at reorienting our priorities, making us reflect on what is truly important and what only appears to be so. The discipline of action is concerned with how to behave with other people. And the discipline of assent is meant to sharpen what the Stoics thought is our most important faculty: judgment.

Then, you'll meet three of the major Stoics of antiquity, especially to learn what they have to teach us about living a eudaimonic life. You'll begin with the 1st-century playwright, statesman, and philosopher Seneca the Younger. You'll study samples from his letters to his friend Lucilius that are meant as an informal curriculum to understand Stoic philosophy. You'll learn how to deal with anger, a highly disruptive and unhealthy emotion, which Seneca called "a temporary madness." And you'll examine his letters of consolation to learn how to cope with grief.

The second major Stoic who is treated in depth is Epictetus, to which five lessons are devoted. These tackle a broad variety of topics: the important and precise role of reason, what we should and should not fear, the true meaning of human freedom, how to practice Stoicism, and how to think of philosophy as the art of living.

Three more lessons are devoted to the third, and arguably most famous, major Stoic: the emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius. Major themes here include the importance of practicing thankfulness toward other people, how to cultivate a strong mind that allows us to weather life's inevitable storms, and the nature of justice.

There were, of course, several other Stoics in antiquity who were just as prominent as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius but by whom only fragments of writings have survived. In the next lesson, you'll learn about two of these: Musonius Rufus and Hierocles. Musonius, who was Epictetus's teacher, is a very practical Stoic who dispensed advice on things like how to eat to what kinds of furnishings we should have for our house. Hierocles was one of the most eloquent advocates of a crucial Stoic concept that is still very relevant to the modern world: cosmopolitanism, the notion that we are all members of a planetary human family and that we should behave accordingly.

The next lesson is about the crucial Stoic concept of role models. While the goal of Stoic practice is to make us into better human beings, how do we know that we are making progress? What goals should we set for ourselves? One way to answer these questions is to carefully consider what models we might want to adopt for our own behavior, patterning ourselves after people who are embodying what it means to be excellent and ethical human beings.

One lesson is then devoted to the idea, articulated by Epictetus, of role ethics. In our lives, we all play different roles, like actors on a stage. Some of these roles are given to us by the circumstances we find ourselves in (e.g., being someone's son or daughter), whereas other roles we choose (e.g., being a friend). Then there is the most fundamental role of all: being a member of the human cosmopolis. What do these roles entail, and how do we balance their sometimes-contrasting demands?

The next lesson addresses some of the common misconceptions about Stoicism. No, Stoics don't attempt to go through life with a stiff upper lip, and they certainly don't try to suppress their emotions. What they do is cultivate their ability to endure what cannot be avoided and work on distancing themselves from unhealthy emotions—such as fear, anger, and hatred—while at the same time mindfully cultivating healthy emotions, such as love, joy, and a sense of justice.

The penultimate lesson explores what it may mean to be a Stoic in the 21st century, in part by way of comparing Stoicism with other well-known philosophies of life, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism.

The final lesson applies the ancient wisdom of Stoicism to contemporary real-life problems. After being presented with examples of personal crises and solutions that draw on the philosophy of Stoicism, you'll discover that Stoicism can be helpful in guiding thoughts and practices in our modern world.

By the time you complete this course, you will have learned not just about the history and ideas of one of the most enduring philosophies of life, but you will also be on your way to a better, more meaningful life yourself. ■

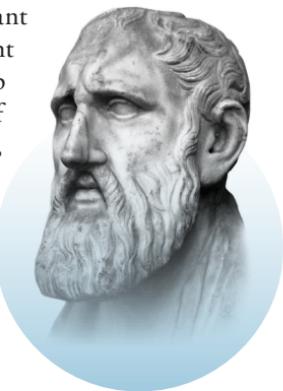


HOW TO LIVE LIKE A STOIC SAGE

This lesson explores the main ideas of Stoic philosophy and explains why it became one of the dominant philosophical schools of antiquity. It also introduces how to practice Stoicism and why the philosophy is so relevant to life today.

ZENO'S SHIPWRECK

- More than 2,000 years ago, a Phoenician merchant named Zeno of Citium* was on board a merchant ship sailing in the Aegean Sea near Athens. The ship encountered a powerful storm and sunk with all of its cargo and many men aboard. But Zeno survived, making it ashore and arriving at Athens.
- Once he recovered from the shock of this experience, he went to a bookshop, where he listened to the *Memorabilia* being read aloud. This is a composition written by the Greek statesman and writer Xenophon about the famous Athenian philosopher Socrates.
- Zeno was so fascinated that he resolved then and there to study philosophy. He turned to the bookseller and asked, “Where can I find a philosopher?” The bookseller looked out onto the street and said, “There goes one!” The philosopher in question was Crates of Thebes. And Zeno became his student.
- After a few years of studying with a number of other teachers, Zeno felt ready to begin his own school of practical philosophy, which became known as Stoicism.

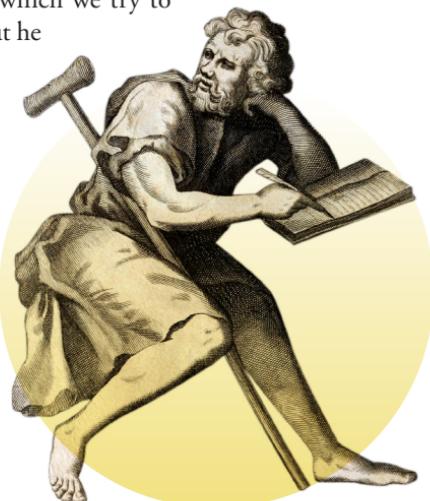


* present-day Cyprus

- The basic ideas of Stoicism are rooted in Zeno's experience during and after the shipwreck, as well as in what he learned by studying philosophy as taught by other schools:
 - We do not control as much as we think we do about the world and our lives, as the sudden shipwreck demonstrated.
 - We can recover from disasters by focusing on what is in our power, like Zeno changing his profession from merchant to philosopher.
 - Following the example of Socrates, the most important thing in life is to live by the light of reason as a good member of the human community, rather than to pursue wealth and fame.

VIRTUE ETHICS

- While standard ethics is focused on answering questions about actions (things like "Is abortion right or wrong?" or "Is human cloning right or wrong?"), virtue ethics, by contrast, focuses on our character. It asks, "How can I become a better person?"
- Aristotle practically invented the approach of virtue ethics as it is understood in the West today. He thought that a eudaimonic life—that is, a life worth living—is one in which we try to become the best humans we can be. But he also contended that such a life requires many things that are not under our control, such as wealth, education, health, and even beauty.
- Epicurus, in contrast, thought that the most important things in life were the pursuit of simple pleasures and the avoidance of pain, both physical and emotional. So, the Epicurean life consists of spending a lot of time with friends, reading and debating, all while accompanied by food and wine.



■ Stoicism is another type of virtue ethics, alongside Aristotelianism and Epicureanism. Indeed, the Stoics were major rivals of the two, and of other schools throughout the Hellenistic period. This is an ancient philosophy born of the need of a Phoenician merchant who was trying to process losing all he had after barely surviving a shipwreck. A sound philosophy of life can change your outlook for the better, as it did for Zeno of Citium.

THE PREMISE OF STOICISM

- Distilled to its essence, Stoicism is a philosophy of personal betterment that puts an emphasis on living reasonably and pro-socially and provides emotional ballast against the vicissitudes of fortune and pain alike. Ultimately, Stoicism teaches us to govern our lives from within, according to our own moral compass, rather than being pushed around by external forces and factors.
- More formally, Stoic philosophy is founded on one crucial premise and relies on two fundamental pillars to provide practical guidance through one's life.
- The premise is to live according to nature. The Stoics figured that if the problem we're facing is how to live a life worth living, then we should take seriously what sort of animal human beings actually are. Two ideas, according to the Stoics, are so important that we might want to organize our entire existence around them: We are capable of reason, and we are inherently social animals.
- A capacity for reason doesn't mean that we are always reasonable, of course. And being social doesn't mean we cannot live in isolation. Instead, it means that we thrive in a social group, pursuing projects that are made possible by the fact that we live in a society.
- From these two observations, the Stoics concluded that a life well lived is one in which we deploy reason for the improvement of society. Living according to nature means using our brains, as imperfect as our brains are, to make life on this planet better for everyone, and therefore for ourselves.

THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

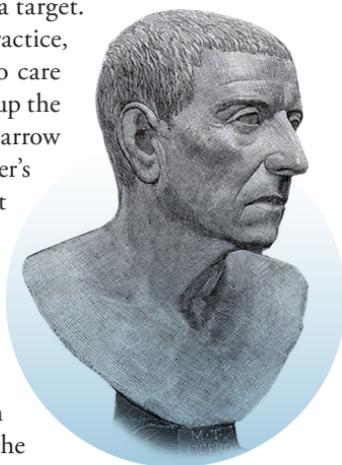
- We can achieve living a life well lived by relying on the two pillars of Stoic philosophy: the four cardinal virtues and the dichotomy of control.
- Improving society, according to the Stoics, isn't something that can be done from the top down—by imposing some kind of utopia on people who might or might not like your view of how things should be run. Instead, the world changes one person at a time, from the bottom up. And the only person you can change is yourself.
- This positive personal change comes about by constantly practicing four virtues, or habits. They are practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance.
 - Practical wisdom tells us the difference between what we can and cannot change.
 - Courage is not just physical but first and foremost moral: the courage to stand up and do the right thing.
 - Justice tells us the right thing to do.
 - Temperance is the notion that we should do things in the right measure, neither overreacting to situations nor failing to do enough to correct things.

What if your coworker is being harassed by the boss? Practical wisdom tells you that this is a situation where you can intervene. You might not be able to change your boss's attitude, but you may be able to improve the culture at your workplace and comfort your coworker. Justice, then, lies in standing up to the boss. Courage is what gives you the strength to do it. And temperance keeps your response to the boss within reasonable and useful limits.

THE DICHOTOMY OF CONTROL

- The second pillar of Stoic philosophy—the dichotomy of control—was famously summarized by the slave-turned-teacher Epictetus at the beginning of his manual for a good life, *The Enchiridion*.
- While we can influence our body, property, reputation, and office, ultimately, they're not under our power. Even the healthiest body can be struck by disease or accident. Your property can be taken away from you for a number of reasons. And your reputation can be ruined through gossip and other people's malicious intent.

- In contrast, opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and other things of our own doing might be influenced by others, but they ultimately are our own responsibility. Other people might try to get you to change your judgments and opinions or make you adopt a different set of values, but the buck, so to speak, stops with you.
- If you take the dichotomy of control to heart, you'll change your entire outlook on life. You'll no longer concern yourself with the outcomes of your decisions but instead with their soundness. The outcome is not up to you, but the decision to do certain things rather than others certainly is.
- The Roman writer Cicero explained the Stoic position by considering an archer who is trying to hit a target. The archer can decide how assiduously to practice, which arrows and bow to select, and how to care for them. They also control their focus right up the moment they let go of the arrow. But once the arrow leaves the bow, nothing at all is under the archer's control. A sudden gust of wind might deflect the best shot, or the target—say, an enemy soldier—might suddenly move.
- Hitting the target is what you're after, so it's what you pursue. But success or failure does not, in and of itself, make you a good or bad archer. This means that you should not attach your self-worth to the outcome but only to the attempt. Then, you will achieve what the ancients called *ataraxia*: the kind of inner tranquility that results from knowing you've done everything that was in your power to do.



ROLE ETHICS

- Another way to understand and practice Stoic philosophy is through what's known as role ethics. The idea is that we all play a variety of roles in our lives—father, son, mother, daughter, boss, employee, and so forth—and that a life worth living involves balancing those roles in the most harmonious way possible.

- According to Epictetus, there are fundamentally three kinds of roles: our basic role as human beings and members of the human cosmopolis; roles that are given to us by circumstances, such as being someone's daughter or son; and roles that we choose for ourselves, such as by having children or being someone's friend.
- The Stoics think that our role as a member of the human cosmopolis is the most important one. Ultimately, we need to work in concert to make sure that we provide a better present for all and a better future for coming generations.
- Within that broad guideline, we then need to balance all of our specific roles the best way possible. That will often entail compromises. How much of a compromise should you make, say, when you contemplate the simultaneous demands of your professional and family lives? This ties back to the cardinal virtues.
- The ancient Stoics had a trick to improving our character: the use of role models. They came up with a gallery of real and fictional role models whose virtues they used to straighten our crooked character.
- One of the most famous of these was Cato the Younger, who gave his life to oppose what he perceived as the tyranny of the Roman dictator Julius Caesar. Another was the mythical Odysseus, who endured 10 years of hardship and turned down the offer of immortality—twice—in order to come back home to his wife and son. And, of course, there is Socrates, whose philosophy inspired the Stoics, and whose death at the hands of the state made him the first martyr to the cause of wisdom.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Inwood, *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What do the Stoics mean by the phrase “live according to nature”?

Answer on page 180

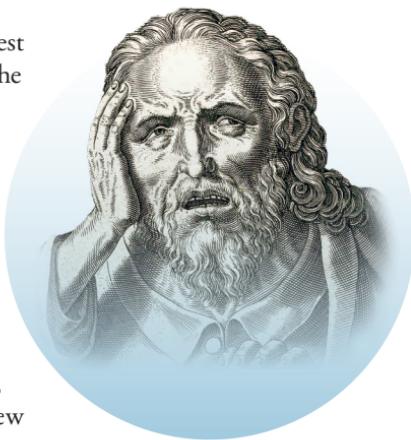


STOICISM FROM HERACLITUS TO THOREAU

To help situate Stoicism among its rivals and influencers, this lesson takes a look at the major Hellenistic schools of thought. It then examines Stoicism's philosophical roots in Socrates and Heraclitus and its evolution through time.

THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

- Alexander the Great ruthlessly built the largest empire the Western world had ever seen by the time he was 32. Then came the catastrophe that abruptly quashed his dreams: He died after a night and day of boozy partying with one of his admirals—or perhaps he was poisoned.
- Regardless, the world that Alexander constructed with so much effort crumbled overnight. With no obvious or legitimate heir to replace him, a 40-year war erupted, all while Rome was asserting itself as a new power in the Mediterranean world.
- In September of the year 31 BCE, a decisive naval confrontation took place at Actium, on the western coast of present-day Greece. This was between the forces of Caesar Octavian on one side and Mark Antony and Cleopatra on the other. Octavian won, ending the Roman civil war that had persisted since the death of Julius Caesar some 13 years earlier. Under the name of Caesar Augustus, Octavian became the first Roman emperor.



- The timespan bracketed by the death of Alexander and the battle of Actium is known as the Hellenistic period. It saw the sudden flourishing of a number of philosophies, including Epicureanism, Cyrenaism, Cynicism, Peripateticism, Skepticism, and Stoicism. It may be no coincidence that the people of this era were interested in practical philosophy, given that their world had been turned upside down by events they had no hope of influencing, let alone controlling.

HELLENISTIC SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

- The question all Hellenistic schools of thought attempted to answer is what constitutes a good human life. The Greek term for such a life is *eudaimonia*, often translated—very badly—as “happiness.” It actually means something closer to a state of contentedness. A more accurate translation could be “flourishing” or “a life worth living.”
- Hellenistic philosophers—all of whom were inspired by, or reacting to, the classical Greek scholar Socrates—came up with a number of answers to the question of what makes for a eudaimonic life.
- The Cyrenaics* thought that physical pleasure was the chief good, so long as we pursue it in a virtuous manner: with temperance, so that we own the pleasure and are not its slaves, and with justice, so that we do not harm others.
- The Cyrenaics’ close cousins, the Epicureans,** also went in for pleasure. But they recognized the importance—and even preeminence—of mental, not just physical, pleasures. Moreover, the Epicureans’ chief good was a life without pain, physical or emotional.
- The so-called Academic Skeptics,*** by contrast, thought the chief good was to achieve a state of ataraxia, or mental tranquility, and that the only way to get there was to suspend judgment. Since the Academic Skeptics maintained that there is no such thing as human knowledge—only opinion—a direct and rational route to *eudaimonia* was to avoid attaching oneself to any particular opinion.

* a school founded by Aristippus of Cyrene

** named after the founder of the sect, Epicurus of Samos

*** named for the Academy, a school founded by Plato

VIRTUE-BASED PHILOSOPHIES

- Then, there are the three virtue-based philosophies: Peripateticism, Cynicism, and Stoicism. You can think of them as being aligned along a spectrum, with Peripateticism at one end, Cynicism at the other, and Stoicism somewhere in the middle.
- The most commonsensical position was that of the Peripatetics, the followers of Aristotle. For Aristotle, the eudaimonic life must be guided by virtue. But it also requires certain external goods, such as a bit of wealth, education, health, and even good looks. Having plenty of these qualities while lacking virtue does not make for a eudaimonic life. Still, being virtuous is insufficient by itself, because human flourishing requires a certain degree of material comfort.
- The Cynics**** believed that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for a eudaimonic life and that externals get in the way. Accordingly, the Cynics did not marry or have children, they did not own property, and they spent most of their time reminding other people that they were mis-living their lives.
- The Stoics struck a brilliant compromise between the rather relaxed Peripatetics and the austere Cynics. The Stoics, like the Cynics, thought that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for a eudaimonic life. But in agreement with Aristotle, they maintained that externals add practical, not moral, value. Being wealthy, educated, or healthy does not make one a good person, just like being poor, uneducated, or sick does not make one a bad person.

INFLUENCES ON STOIC PHILOSOPHY

- The two major influences on Stoic philosophy were the philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, who lived in the late 6th century BCE, and none other than Socrates himself, in the 5th century BCE.
- The Stoics often referred to their philosophy as Socraticism to indicate how close they felt to the sage of Athens. Two elements of Socrates's philosophy in particular were adopted and developed by the Stoics: the notion that philosophy ought to be practiced, not just studied, and the idea that virtue is the chief good.

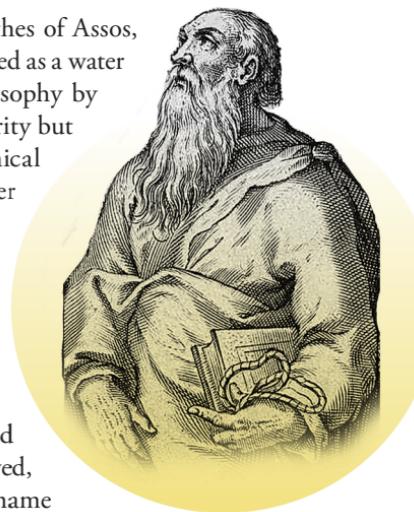
**** a word that in ancient Greek meant “dog-like,” capturing their minimalist and in-your-face lifestyle

- Until Socrates, philosophers had been interested in the theoretical exploration of a large number of areas of inquiry, including metaphysics and natural philosophy, or what we call science. Their interest in practicing a particular art of living was minimal at best.
- Socrates represented a turning point. He spent most of his life within the walls of Athens, asking people if they knew what they were talking about when they used words such as *justice*, *piety*, and the like. Socrates lived an ethical life, paying attention to what he was doing and trying to be the best human he could be.
- The Stoics took the Socratic approach and married it with that of the pre-Socratics. They studied subjects outside ethics, such as logic and metaphysics, but only with the goal of figuring out how to live a eudaimonic life. The notion was that if one doesn't know how to reason about things—or does not appreciate how the world works—then one is likely to mis-live their life.
- The second element of Socratic philosophy imported into Stoicism is the notion that virtue is the chief good in a human life. This idea is developed in the Platonic dialogue known as the *Euthydemus*, where Socrates confronts two Sophists.
- Happiness, Socrates claims, derives not from having external goods—like money, property, or even knowledge—but rather from using those things wisely. In fact, some external goods can actually get in the way of a eudaimonic life. He argues that if we spend our lives pursuing wealth or fame rather than trying to become better humans, we will become distracted from what really matters. Virtue is the chief good because it is the only thing that can never, by definition, be used for ill.
- An earlier influence on Stoicism, and of a very different kind, was the pre-Socratic Heraclitus of Ephesus. Heraclitus is perhaps most famous for having said that one cannot step into the same river twice. The river—like everything else in the universe—is constantly changing, and therefore will not be the same today as it was if you stepped in it yesterday, or even five minutes ago.

- This approach regards dynamic change, not static objects, as the fundamental aspect of reality. Nowadays, this is called process metaphysics, and it happens to be in line with the latest research in fundamental physics. The Stoics developed their own metaphysics on the basis of Heraclitus's insight and used this notion of the impermanence of things as a way to counter our natural tendency to resist change.

EARLY STOICISM

- The term *Stoicism* comes from the fact that the founder of this school of thought, Zeno of Citium, used to gather his followers in a public space called the Stoa Poikile, or painted porch. *Stoa* became a standard way to refer to the school.
- The second head of the Stoa was Cleanthes of Assos, who was an impoverished boxer who worked as a water carrier by night in order to study philosophy by day. He had a reputation for moral integrity but not for particularly insightful philosophical discourse. The school declined under his leadership.
- Cleanthes was succeeded by Chrysippus of Soli, a prolific writer and brilliant logician who is primarily responsible for the Stoic philosophy as we understand it today. However, all that survives from Chrysippus are the titles of his books and a scatter of fragments. Had his work survived, he would likely be as much a household name as Plato and Aristotle.
- In the year 86 BCE, the Roman general Sulla defeated the Athenians, altering the course of Western philosophy and Stoicism in particular. Philosophers moved to other places in the Mediterranean—including Alexandria of Egypt, the Greek island of Rhodes, and Rome itself—leading to a period called the Middle Stoa.



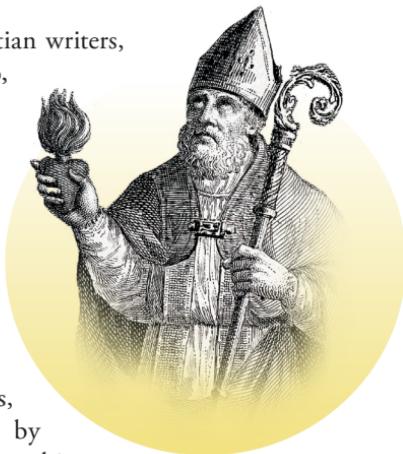
- The two major figures of the Middle Stoa were Panaetius of Rhodes and his student Posidonius. Panaetius attempted to merge ideas from Stoicism and Platonism, inquiring into such ideas as how to reconcile the apparent conflict between what is moral and what is useful. Posidonius was a natural philosopher—or scientist, in modern terminology—who took seriously the Stoic notion that everything is interconnected. He studied astronomy, meteorology, geography, geology, and ethnology.
- The last ancient period of Stoic history is the best understood and most influential, since many of the writings from that time survive. This is the time of the later Stoic thinkers: Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Hierocles, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Much of their surviving writing deals with Stoic ethics.
- After the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE, Stoicism declined, along with all the Greco-Roman philosophical schools. This made way for the rise of Christianity, which was embraced by the emperor Constantine in the year 312 CE.



Last Words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (1844), Eugène Delacroix

STOICISM AND CHRISTIANITY

- Stoicism was highly influential with Christian writers, including Paul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas.
- Paul of Tarsus was rumored to have corresponded with the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, though this turned out to be a forgery. Still, the fifth book of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, tells us how Paul arrived in Athens and debated Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.
- In the late 4th and early 5th centuries, Augustine of Hippo was influenced by Stoic ethics, logic, and physics. However, his disagreements with Stoicism shaped Christian theology and the reception of Stoic philosophy through the centuries.
- Much later, the 13th-century Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas imported wholesale from Stoic philosophy when he combined the four cardinal Stoic virtues of practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance to the more typically Christian virtues of hope, faith, and charity.
- Particularly interesting was an attempt to merge Christianity and Stoicism by the Flemish philosopher Justus Lipsius in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Influenced by Seneca, Lipsius maintained that human beings should not submit to the passions—that is, the negative, disruptive emotions—but rather to God. He also argued that human freedom consists in submitting to the will of God. This is a Christian twist on the Stoic notion that freedom comes from accepting whatever the universe throws our way.
- Lipsius's attempt to reconcile Stoicism and Christianity did not last long, as it was opposed by church authorities. Nevertheless, it influenced such major thinkers as Francis Bacon, Montesquieu, and Montaigne.



THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

- Stoicism came back into vogue during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, influencing such figures as Descartes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Hume, Adam Smith, and Kant, among others.
- Perhaps the most important early modern philosopher to be strongly affected by Stoicism was the Enlightenment thinker Baruch Spinoza, who lived from 1632 to 1677. Spinoza held that the world simply is God or Nature, a metaphysical position hard to distinguish from that of the Stoics. Everything happens because of cause and effect, which means that everything that happens stems from God or Nature.
- Another major Enlightenment figure to be influenced by Stoicism was the Prussian German philosopher Immanuel Kant. While his deontological—that is, duty-based—system of ethics is quite different from the virtue ethics of Stoicism, Kant admired the Stoic emphasis on one's duty toward oneself and others as well as the Stoic notion of cosmopolitanism.
- The 19th-century American transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are also associated with Stoicism. Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance," published in 1841, features strong echoes of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. Thoreau also embraced many aspects of the Stoic approach, particularly the notion that philosophy ought to be practical—and this may well be the goal of this very course.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Holiday and Hanselman, *Lives of the Stoics*.

QUESTIONS

- ↗ What ideas from Stoicism were incorporated into Christianity?

Answer on page 180

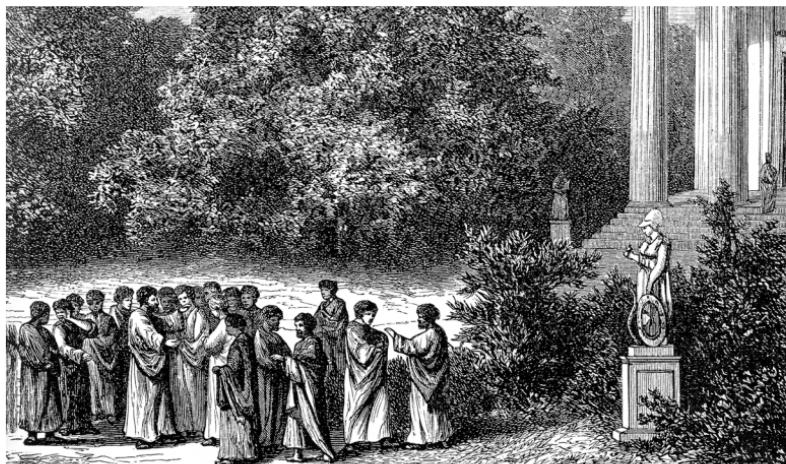


THE STOIC GARDEN: PHYSICS, ETHICS, LOGIC

Imagine tending a garden whose fruits you deem to be precious. At the very minimum, you would need a sturdy fence to keep out weeds and animals as well as fertile soil to grow beautiful flowers and nutritious fruits. That's more or less the way the ancient Stoics thought of how to live the good life, using a number of metaphors to get their point across.

COMPONENTS OF THE GARDEN

The fruits in the metaphorical garden are what the Stoics called ethics. Nowadays, ethics refers to the study of right and wrong. But in antiquity, ethics was nothing less than the study of how best to live one's life. In addition to the ability to arrive at judgments concerning right and wrong, this encompassed ideas like what your goals in life should be and how you should relate to other people.

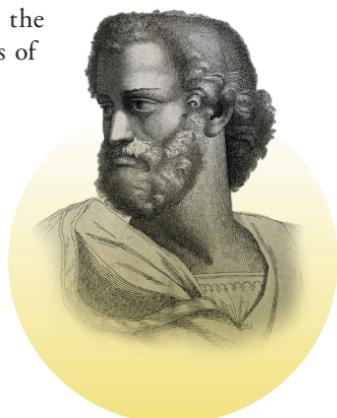


- The fertile soil of the Stoic garden is physics, which encompassed science, metaphysics, and theology. To study physics, in other words, meant to try to get a grasp on how the world works. This is important, according to the Stoics, because if we embrace the wrong metaphysics, we'll be likely to mis-live, since we would be living as if the world were different from what it is.
- This is why the Stoics included a third component in the garden. The fence surrounding the garden represents good thinking to protect us from living according to nonsensical notions. They used the word *logic*, though this too had a broader meaning than it does in modern times. Early on, logic encompassed anything having to do with better reasoning, including formal logic but also cognitive science, rhetoric, and epistemology.
- Good reasoning allows us to grasp the way the world is and leads us to navigate life in the best possible way. So logic informs both physics and ethics. And ethics, in turn, depends on both logic and physics.

ARISTOTELIAN LOGIC

- The Stoics were characteristically interested in what might be termed practical logic: the sort of thing that could be useful to everyone, right here and now. This can be contrasted with Aristotelian logic.
- Consider a standard type of Aristotelian argument, known as a syllogism, consisting of two premises and one conclusion:
 - All giraffes are animals;
 - All animals are mortal;
 - Therefore, all giraffes are mortal.
- The general form of this argument is
 - All A are B;
 - All B are C;
 - Therefore, all A are C.

- The argument is valid, meaning that no matter what A, B, and C stand for, if the two premises are true, then the conclusion must logically follow.
- This specific argument about animals and giraffes is also sound, which means that the two premises are, in fact, true. If an argument is both valid and sound, then the conclusion not only follows logically from the premises, but it's also true.
- This is not always the case. Look, for instance, at this argument:
 - All giraffes are animals;
 - All animals are blue;
 - Therefore, all giraffes are blue.
- It's still formally valid, but the second premise—all animals are blue—is obviously false, which makes the argument unsound. The conclusion, therefore, is false, even though it follows logically from the premises.
- Finally, Aristotle pointed out that there can be arguments that are invalid, in which case the conclusion does not logically follow, regardless of whether it's true or not. For instance:
 - All giraffes are animals;
 - All animals are mortal;
 - Therefore, all animals are giraffes.



- The formal structure of this syllogism is

- All A are B;
- All B are C;
- Therefore, all B are A.

- An important thing to notice is that Aristotle's syllogisms are concerned with the largest sets of a given class of objects: "all" giraffes, "all" animals, and so forth. That is, they are concerned with universal terms.

STOIC LOGIC

- Compare Aristotle's syllogisms with a typical Stoic argument, made of propositions, which the Stoics called assertibles:
 - If it is sunny this afternoon, then I will go for a walk;
 - It is sunny this afternoon;
 - Therefore, I will go for a walk.
- The formal structure of the argument is
 - If A, then B;
 - A;
 - Therefore, B.
- This differs from Aristotle's syllogisms in two important respects. First, the Stoics are concerned with propositions, not individual terms. Second, the structure of the argument is conditional: If something is the case, then something else will also be the case.
- Moreover, the truth of the sort of propositions the Stoics were interested in may depend on circumstances. The assertible proposition "it is sunny now" may be true in the morning but false in the afternoon. And it will definitely be false at night.
- We are rarely, if ever, concerned with statements about the kind of universal properties that interested Aristotle so much. But we are constantly engaged by conditional propositions.

Aristotelian logic dominated the thinking of philosophers throughout antiquity and the middle ages and is still taught in introductory courses today. But while Stoic logic was known for many centuries, it began to be fully appreciated only in the early 20th century, with the pioneering work on propositional logic by the Polish logician Jan Łukasiewicz.

STOIC EPISTEMOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY

- The Stoics also developed a tightly integrated epistemology—or theory of knowledge—and psychology as part of their broader conception of logic. Their psychology was pressed in the service of accounting for how we arrive at decisions and why so often our decisions are based on incorrect judgments about the world.
- A story found in *Attic Nights*, a book written by Aulus Gellius in the 2nd century, shows how Stoic epistemology and psychology are intertwined. Gellius speaks of a Stoic philosopher who has embarked on a sea voyage. Suddenly, a fearsome storm breaks out, and the philosopher goes pale, like every other passenger on the ship.
- When the storm is over, Gellius asks the philosopher why he reacted to the danger in the same manner that everyone else did, since the Stoics say that the only truly bad thing is unvirtuous behavior. External events, like a storm at sea, are neutral—neither good nor bad. They just are.
- The Stoic replies by getting out a copy of the fifth book of Epictetus's *Discourses*,* which explains the Stoic concept of impressions. An impression is the initial judgment we have of a sense perception. For instance, you see that a storm is battering the ship, and your impression may be expressed propositionally as “there is a storm out there, and this is a bad thing.”
- The impression, then, is made of two components: the sensorial input, as in the case of seeing the storm in front of your eyes, and an immediate judgment—that the storm is a bad thing. As a result of these two components, your first reaction is automatic: You experience the physiological symptoms of fear.**
- But if you've trained yourself well as a Stoic, you can then gain what modern psychologists would call some cognitive distance from the automatic judgment. There is indeed a storm out there, but it doesn't follow that this is bad. The storm just is. Any additional judgment needs to be examined and may very well be unwarranted.

* This work unfortunately does not survive in modern times.

** This first, automatic reaction is what the Stoics called a first movement of the soul.

- The Stoic philosopher explained to Gellius that he—like any other human being—could not control the first motion of his soul, which is why he went pale. But then he examined the impression and said to himself: There is a storm out there, but since the storm does not affect my virtue, it is neither good nor bad. As a result, he was at peace with whatever would happen next.
- This story implies that emotions are really two things. Take fear, for instance. There is the first movement, or the automatic physiological reaction to a perceived danger. This becomes a full-fledged emotion only once we add—implicitly or explicitly—a cognitive judgment: Not only do you feel afraid, but you really should be afraid, because something bad is happening to you!
- This gives us the most powerful weapon in the Stoic arsenal. While the automatic reaction is not under our control, the cognitive component is. Therefore, we can challenge our own thoughts and train ourselves not to give in to irrational or damaging impressions.***

KNOWLEDGE

- Knowledge—or episteme **** for the Stoics—results from the understanding of a systemic web of knowledge, or how everything is connected to everything else. It is not solely the result of perceiving individual facts and arriving at right judgments about those facts.
- In a sense, the Stoics were empiricists. They thought that human knowledge ultimately is rooted in sensory experience. But empirical data through sense impressions is only part of the story, as our judgment plays a major role in forming opinions. Knowledge in the strict sense, moreover, is arrived at only when someone puts together sensorial experience, sound judgments, and a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the world.

*** This tool has been used to great effect over the past several decades by cognitive behavioral therapists.

**** Today, the best approximation we have to the sort of knowledge the Stoics had in mind is what we call scientific knowledge.

- The Stoics also acknowledged the existence of something we might call natural dispositions. Human beings, according to Epictetus, are naturally inclined to what the Stoics called virtue and what we would today characterize as pro-social behavior. This means that our notion of what is good begins with some innate disposition to interact constructively with other people, usually our caretakers.
- Later on, experience refines this disposition, as we learn from the feedback we get from others when growing up. Finally, the use of reason allows us to make one more leap and consider abstract notions such as virtue, as well as to appreciate the fact that all human beings are fundamentally the same. That means that someone living on the other side of the planet has the same needs and wants, and should be accorded the same respect and dignity, as your friends and family.
- Stoic logic, then, provides the basis for sound reasoning about the world and about ourselves. In turn, sound reasoning gives us a grasp of how the world works—the province of Stoic physics—and of how to live virtuously, the province of Stoic ethics.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Sellars, *Stoicism*.

QUESTION

- ↗ Why is logic a part of the Stoic curriculum, and what did the Stoics mean by that term?

Answer on page 180



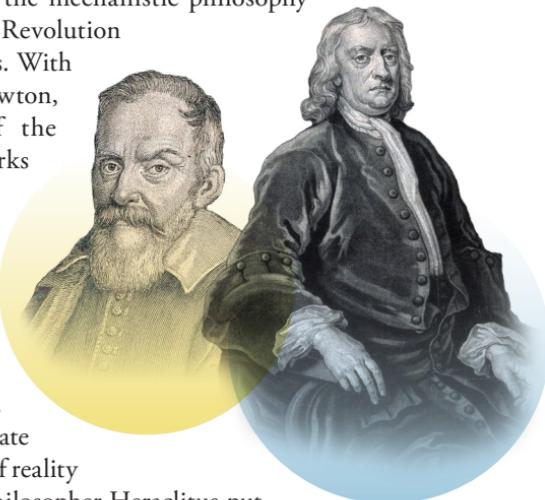
HOW STOICS UNDERSTAND PROVIDENCE

This lesson looks at Stoic physics, exploring how Stoics think the world hangs together. It considers three interrelated notions of their metaphysics: materialism, cause-effect, and determinism.

THE COSMIC ORGANISM

- The ancient Stoics were pantheists: They believed that God is intrinsic to—and inherent in—the world around us. Stated otherwise, they believed that the entire universe is a living organism endowed with reason, or logos. And they referred to this living organism interchangeably as God or Nature. If the universe itself is God, then we are bits and pieces of God, and we, too, are endowed with logos, since we are capable of reason.
- The Stoic understanding of Providence is very different from that found in the Christian tradition. For Christians, Providence is whatever God decrees will happen, according to his plans. These plans are inscrutable to mere mortals but nevertheless take mortals into account because God loves us.
- The Stoics, in contrast, thought of our relationship with the cosmos as one of part-to-whole. If an organism needs to cross a muddy path in order to get where it's going, it is the foot's duty to get into the mud, however much it may dislike the experience.
- The crossing of the muddy path isn't something that happens for the benefit of the foot but for that of the organism. The only good thing from the point of view of the foot—if it could reason—is that it would appreciate that it's doing something good in the greater scheme of things.

- The view of the cosmos as an organism was common in antiquity, but it was first replaced by the Christian metaphysical understanding of the world and eventually by the mechanistic philosophy that underlies the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. With the work of Galileo and Newton, science began to think of the universe as a machine that works by following the eternal laws of nature.
- That view, in turn, got upset by modern conceptions arising from Einstein's theory of general relativity and from quantum mechanics. Our current best bet to articulate a coherent metaphysical view of reality is that—as the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus put it—everything changes.
- Contemporary metaphysicians and fundamental physicists suggest there are no stable things in the world, only processes that change temporary configurations of matter into other temporary configurations. We never step into the same river twice because the river changes constantly. While this broadly corresponds to the Stoic view, we are certainly not going back to an organismal view of the world.



MATERIALISM

- The Stoics were materialists in the sense that they thought everything that exists is made of stuff, or what today we call matter. God falls in that category as well, since it is the same thing as the universe itself. The soul also is material and likely does not persist after we die but rather is recycled into the cosmos, just like the stuff that constitutes our bodies.
- Even mental events are material things for the Stoics. Consider, for instance, what they called impressions: mental events that can be triggered by the perception of an external object or by internal mental processes.

An example of a perception-based impression would be your conclusion that it would be good to have some of that chocolate gelato you've just seen in the window of a shop. Conversely, an internally generated impression would be the thought that the square root of nine is three.

- In both cases, according to the Stoics, your soul is being physically imprinted with an impression. Today, we would say that a mental event is instantiated by a particular chemical or electrical stimulation in the brain. And, of course, we do think that the brain, chemical substances, and electrical impulses are made of matter or energy. Since energy is just another form of matter, we agree that mental events are material in nature.
- Even if we agree that thoughts are made possible by material substances, such as our brains, clearly some things are immaterial. We tend to think that the highest metaphysical category is existence: Things either exist or they don't. Gelato exists, but mathematical concepts present a problem. The square root of nine is an immaterial concept, not a physical object.
- According to some modern metaphysicians and philosophers of mathematics, mathematical concepts do exist independently of our thinking about them. This view is called mathematical Platonism, and it holds that mathematicians do not invent concepts but rather discover them. It's analogous, in a way, to how astronomers discover planets. Another group of metaphysicians and philosophers of mathematics, by contrast, thinks that mathematical concepts are human inventions.
- The Stoics provided a different view. They denied that existence is the highest metaphysical category. That privilege belongs to something they called *ti* in Greek, which roughly translates as "reality." Reality, in turn, consists of the *somata* (corporeals) and the *asomata* (incorporeals).
- The incorporeals do not exist but nonetheless are part of reality—like mathematical objects, for instance. Incorporeals have to be real, otherwise they could not be the object of thought. But they cannot exist, because they are not made of stuff.

The ancient Stoics thought that the seat of the soul was the heart. We would say today that the seat of the mind is the brain.

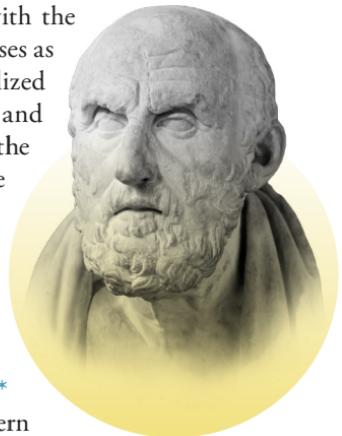
CAUSE-EFFECT

- How do we know if something belongs to the category of corporeals or incorporeals? That's where the concept of universal cause-effect comes into play. The ancient Stoics thought that the only things that can properly be said to exist are those that have the power to act causally on other things.
- Thoughts do have power, since they can bring about action. For instance, in the case of the gelato, you might decide to go into the shop and buy some. The gelato itself has causal powers: It can cause a pleasurable sensation when you eat it. But the square root of nine does not have causal powers. That's why it doesn't exist, though it is real, since we can think it.
- Understood this way, *exist* takes on two different meanings. For this reason, the Stoics came up with two different terms for what constitutes reality: things that exist and things that subsist.*
- The Stoics thought that cause-effect relations permeate the cosmos, affecting everything. They distinguished between different kinds of causes, or different degrees of causality. There are, for instance, universal causes, like the laws of nature that move the entire cosmos. Then there are more local causes that affect only a small portion of the cosmic web. The universe will go on as before regardless of whether you buy the gelato or not.
- There are also co-causes. If you walk past a gelato shop and decide to buy a cone, there must have been additional co-causes—plenty of people walk in front of gelato displays without automatically buying some. You might have passed by the shop because you're taking a different route home than normal due to a strike affecting the subway system. Or you might have been feeling a bit down that day because of something that happened at work, so you yielded to the temptation of chocolate gelato more readily than you would have otherwise.
- All of these are co-causes that result in you eating gelato. Some are external to you, like the strike that made it impossible to use the subway. Some are internal, like the propensity to seek comfort food when upset.

* The corporeals can be said to exist, while the incorporeals subsist.

DETERMINISM

- The Stoic logician Chrysippus came up with the notion that there are universal and local causes as well as a number of co-causes. And he realized that this distinction between internal and external causes is crucial to make sense of the human power of volition: our ability to arrive at judgments and make decisions.
- You've likely heard of this concept under the misleading term *free will*. This refers to the notion—rooted in Christian theology—that our will can be contra-causal, or independent of external causes.^{**}
If we agree with the Stoics—and with modern physics—that everything has a cause, then the ability to make decisions independently of external causes is a violation of the laws of nature.
- Chrysippus used an interesting analogy to explain the Stoic position on volition. He started from the notion that if everything is caused by something else, then we live in what modern metaphysicians call a deterministic universe. Causes determine effects, and effects are determined by causes.
- To make sense of this, Chrysippus invited us to consider a cylinder resting on a flat surface. If you push the cylinder, it will roll. If asked why the cylinder is rolling, you might be tempted to answer, “because I pushed it.” But that’s only part of the story. The cylinder also rolled because it’s in the nature of cylinders to roll. Had it been a cube, it would have flipped, or stayed still, but not rolled. So the rolling of the cylinder is co-caused by an external event—the push—and by the internal constitution of the cylinder itself.

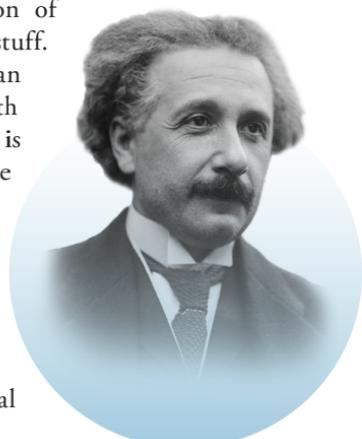


^{**} For Christians, this notion is important because it's a defense against the argument from evil, which goes something like this: If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and benevolent, how can there be evil in the world? The answer is that God gave us free will, so we are the ones responsible for the evil.

- The same goes for volition, known in ancient Greek as *prohairesis*. Whenever you make a decision, no exception to the cosmic web of cause-effect takes place. But some of the co-causes are internal and are the result of your character. Your character, in turn, can be molded over by external events and internal dynamics. Indeed, one could see the whole point of Stoic training as a way to refine our *prohairesis*—our faculty of judgment.
- It's in this sense that our judgments, values, and decisions are truly our own. Things don't just happen to us. We're not puppets pushed by external causes. We are part and parcel of the web of cause-effect. We play an active role in it.***

STOIC PHYSICS AND MODERN SCIENCE

- For all their agreement, there are some tensions between the Stoics' view of the cosmos and the modern scientific take. The contemporary scientific outlook accepts the notions of materialism, universal cause-effect, and determinism, but there are some caveats. A bigger divergence concerns the Stoic idea that the cosmos is a living organism endowed with reason, something that seems to be entirely at odds with modern science.
- Modern science does accept the notion of materialism—that everything is made of stuff. The caveat lies in what, exactly, we mean by *matter*. Einstein famously showed with his theory of special relativity that there is an equivalency between matter (or, more exactly, mass) and energy. More recent developments hint at the possibility that what we call matter is not fundamental but emerges from the effect of the Higgs boson. So, the Stoic position remains acceptable only if matter is whatever physicists establish as the most fundamental constituent of the world.



*** This position, referred to as compatibilism, is still very popular among modern philosophers.

- The principle of cause-effect is still considered universal in science, despite the fact that philosophers have debated for a long time what the relation of cause and effect is. Philosophical discussions aside, the notion of causality is a fundamental concept of physics as well as chemistry, biology, geology, and other sciences. While we may not truly understand the deep nature of the cause-effect relation, it seems that the concept is here to stay.
- People often object to the notion that we live in a deterministic universe by invoking quantum mechanics and the alleged fundamental randomness of quantum events. Quantum mechanics is a mathematical formalism used to describe the motions and interactions of subatomic particles, but whether these interactions are random or rigidly determined is unknown. But the equations that constitute the backbone of quantum mechanical theory are themselves deterministic, meaning they have analytical solutions. So, if these equations describe the behavior of the universe—and they certainly do—then, at least in that sense, the universe is deterministic.
- Most importantly, however, the Stoics simply meant that things unfold according to cause and effect. Suppose that the relation of cause-effect holds probabilistically, as some interpretations of quantum mechanics suggest. Cause-effect is still a crucial notion in science, and so is determinism. Science and Stoicism are therefore compatible in this respect.
- Finally, if, on the basis of modern science, we discard the notion that the cosmos is a living organism endowed with reason, it would seem that the Stoic concept of Providence should also be discarded. This conception of Providence says that things happen for the benefit of the cosmic organism. We are part of the cosmic organism, which is why we should be happy to do whatever helps the cosmos, regardless of how unpleasant it may be for us.
- But nowadays, we don't think that the universe is a living organism that does what is good for itself. This means that if something unpleasant happens to us, we don't have the comfort of thinking of ourselves as a foot that is stepping in the mud for the benefit of the larger organism. When we step in the mud, it's just bad luck. And it doesn't feel good.

- Does this mean that Stoicism has become untenable as a philosophy of life? Not if we sensibly update it, bringing it up to speed with modern science in a coherent fashion, without completely upsetting the original system.
- It turns out that not only can this be done, but the ancient Stoics themselves hinted in that direction. They knew they didn't possess ultimate knowledge. The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, in several passages of his *Meditations*, explicitly considers the possibility that the Stoics got part of their metaphysics wrong. But he reminds himself that even if they did get some of it wrong, there is still much value in Stoic ethics.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Sellars, *Stoicism*.

QUESTION

- ↗ Why is physics part of the Stoic curriculum, and what did the Stoics mean by that term?

Answer on page 180



USING STOIC ETHICS TO ACHIEVE HAPPINESS

Ethics as a field of inquiry is conceived in radically different ways today compared to ancient philosophy. Modern ethics is, in essence, the study of right and wrong. Ancient ethics was the study of how to live one's life. Appreciating the difference between ancient and modern conceptions of ethics is key to understanding how Stoic philosophy works and how to practice it.

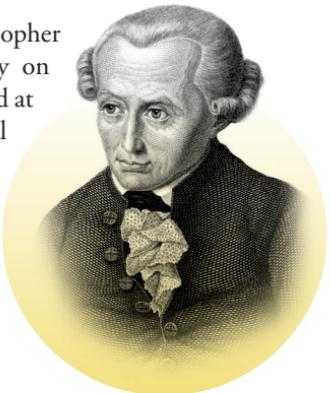
KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY AND UTILITARIANISM

- If you look up the terms *ethics* and *morality* in a dictionary, you'll see they're used largely as synonyms, meaning something like "the standards that govern right and wrong conduct." A moral, or ethical, person is construed as someone who tends to behave according to general standards of morality or ethics. An immoral person is one who fails to do so.
- The two most common modern ethical frameworks are Kantian deontology* and utilitarianism.

The words ***ethics*** and ***morality*** have revealing roots: the first from the Greek ***ethikos***, relating to character, and the second from the Latin ***moralis***, having to do with habits and customs. ***Moralis*** is how the Latin writer Cicero, one of the first philosophers of the Roman world, translated the Greek ***ethikos***.

* Deontology means duty-based. The Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments, for instance, are deontological, articulating 10 universal rules of conduct.

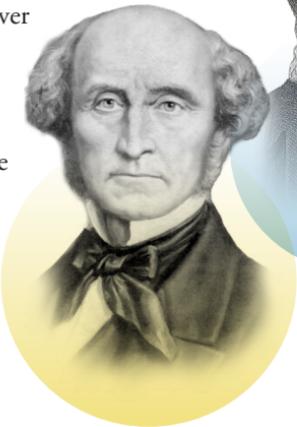
During the Enlightenment, the modern philosopher Immanuel Kant sought to establish morality on a rational, rather than religious, basis. He arrived at a single commandment known as the categorical imperative. It holds that we should strive to act according to how we wish everyone would act. For instance, if you are wondering whether lying is ethical or not, think of what the world would be like if everyone lied all the time. Civil intercourse would be impossible. So, lying is not ethical.



Utilitarianism was first articulated by Jeremy Bentham, who lived from 1748 to 1832, and revised by his student John Stuart Mill, who lived from 1806 to 1873. Utilitarians think that what is right is whatever increases the happiness of most people, or whatever decreases the pain of most people.



Kantian deontology and utilitarianism both have their critics and supporters. Ancient Greco-Romans would have been puzzled by the whole notion that there can be a system of morals based on universal rules. Right or wrong behavior depends on the circumstances. Often, lying is indeed wrong, but it can occasionally be the right thing to do.



VIRTUE ETHICS AND NATURE

The Greco-Roman approach—of which Stoicism is a prominent example—is known as virtue ethics. The focus is on the character of the person, not on individual actions. And the question asked is not whether a given action is right or wrong but rather whether the individual is improving as a human being.

- Virtually all schools of Hellenistic philosophy say we should live according to nature, or following nature. But what does that mean? Here, the various philosophies differed. On one thing, however, they agreed: Living according to nature does not mean that whatever is natural is good.
- Indeed, that notion is known in modern philosophy as an appeal to nature, and it's considered a logical fallacy. If you think what is natural is good, then why do you go to a doctor when struck by disease? Why don't you put poisonous mushrooms on your dinner table? Why do you seek shelter when a hurricane or earthquake strikes?
- So, to live according to nature can't possibly mean that whatever is natural is good. The true meaning is found in theories of human nature and the connection between science and ethics.
- Consider the tomato plant. What counts as a good life for such a species? Any decent biologist, and a lot of people who grow tomatoes in their backyard, will tell you that tomatoes need a certain amount of water, nutrients in the soil, and lots of sunlight. They should also be shielded from parasites and herbivores. So, by understanding the biology of tomatoes, one is able to tell what counts as a good or a bad life for a tomato.
- Humans are a lot more complicated than tomatoes, but we are biological beings nonetheless. At a minimum, we know that humans need food and shelter to survive. Still, surviving isn't the same as flourishing. Here is where the various Hellenistic schools diverged in opinion. They put forth different theories of human nature, thereby giving different priorities to distinct factors that contribute to human flourishing.

HUMAN NATURE

- The Stoics thought that there are two major characteristics that, when combined, distinguish us from any other living species on the planet: We are highly social, and we are capable of sophisticated reasoning.
- There are, of course, other social species. Ants, bees, and termites come to mind. But even though social insects are capable of sophisticated behaviors, they act more like genetically programmed automata than beings endowed with volition. They do what they do without reflecting on whether it's right or wrong.

- Social primates, by contrast, are a different and more sophisticated class. Orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos are all smart animals. And primatologists have suggested that—at least in the case of the bonobos—they display the rudiments of moral behavior. They help each other, even among nonrelatives, and intervene when members of their group behave unfairly toward other members.
- Still, there are no bonobo treatises on moral philosophy, or on any other subject matter. It is only *Homo sapiens* who are capable of interacting in sophisticated ways with members of their own species, particularly through language.
- If this analysis is correct, and the Stoics are right that the two most important characteristics of our species are our sociability and our ability to think rationally, then we have a pretty good hint at what makes a human life good. In addition to such basics as food and shelter, we need to live in social groups to which we feel connected, and we need to use our brains to feel satisfied.
- Given all this, what the Stoics thought begins to make sense: A good human life is one in which we apply our ability to reason to improve society at large.

There is scientific evidence to show that our brains get flooded with pleasure hormones whenever we're able to apply our intelligence to solve a problem or discover a hidden pattern. That's what happens when you solve a crossword puzzle, figure out how to fix the toilet, or accomplish anything else you put your mind to.

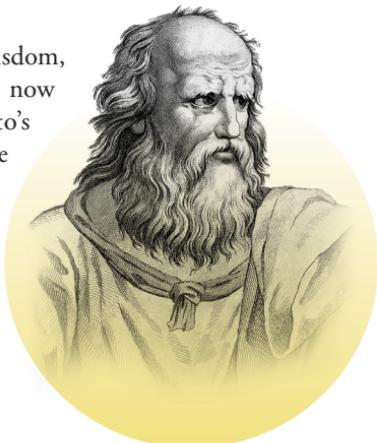
VIRTUE ACROSS CULTURES

- How we translate living according to nature into everyday practice concerns Stoicism's cardinal virtues.
- A virtue is simply a behavioral disposition, which means that it's a reflection of someone's character. For instance, some people are prone to be generous, perhaps with their time or their finances. Generosity is a virtue, and it reflects well on the character of the person who offers it.

- The opposite of a virtue is a vice. For instance, the opposite of generosity is stinginess. And nobody thinks that a stingy person has a good character.
- Of course, things are not binary: There are degrees of generosity (or stinginess), and the same person may be more or less generous (or stingy) over time or depending on the circumstances. Still, we praise generosity and criticize stinginess, and we think the more consistently a person is generous, the more virtuous they are.
- Nowadays, the word *virtue* is often associated with the Christian concept, which focuses on things like chastity, purity, and so forth. The Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas systematized Christian virtues in the 13th century. According to him, there are seven virtues, and four of them are the same cardinal virtues recognized by the Stoics: practical wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. The additional three—faith, hope, and charity—come from Paul of Tarsus.
- The Greek word used by the Stoics in this context is *arete*, which is often translated as “virtue” but more precisely means “excellence.” In an important sense, the Stoics are telling us that we should try to be excellent human beings, or the best human beings we can be.
- Empirical evidence suggests that human cultures appear to universally recognize a small number of virtues, and that includes the Stoic ones. Psychologist Katherine Dahlsgaard and collaborators discovered six “core virtues” across a number of cultures and traditions: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence.
- Other than the four cardinal virtues, then, we have humanity and transcendence. However, humanity and transcendence are also found within the Stoic tradition, but they are not treated as virtues. Instead, humanity corresponds to the Stoic notion of cosmopolitanism—the idea that we are all brothers and sisters and should help each other. Transcendence in Stoicism is the notion that we are a part of the cosmic whole.

STOIC CARDINAL VIRTUES

- The four Stoic cardinal virtues are practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. This lesson now takes a closer look at each virtue using Plato's dictionary of philosophical terms as they were used in antiquity.
- Practical wisdom is
 - the ability which by itself is productive of human happiness; the knowledge of what is good and bad; the knowledge that produces happiness; the disposition by which we judge what is to be done and what is not to be done.
- The Stoics maintained that the only things that are truly good or bad for us are our own good or bad judgments, respectively. Everything else might have value, but it falls into the broad categories of preferred or dispreferred indifferents.*^{*}
- Plato defines the second virtue, courage, as
 - the state of the soul which is unmoved by fear; ... self-restraint in the soul about what is fearful and terrible; being intrepid in the face of death; the state which stands on guard over correct thinking in dangerous situations; ... force of fortitude in respect of virtue; [and] calm in the soul about what correct thinking takes to be frightening or encouraging things.
- While we typically associate the word *courage* with physical bravery, especially in battle, the Stoics used the term with a moral connotation, particularly in the sense of having the fortitude to do the right thing.



** *Indifferent*, in Stoic lingo, doesn't mean that we don't care about it. For instance, health, wealth, and education are preferred indifferents. Correspondingly, sickness, poverty, and ignorance are dispreferred indifferents.

- The right thing to do is the province of the third virtue, justice, which classically is defined as

the unanimity of the soul with itself, and the good discipline of the parts of the soul with respect to each other and concerning each other; the state that distributes to each person according to what is deserved; the state on account of which its possessor chooses what appears to him to be just; ... social equality.

- Notice that a just person is one who is at peace with themselves. And this peace is reached precisely by our conscious work to achieve social justice by treating others fairly.

- Finally, temperance is

moderation of the soul concerning the desires and pleasures that normally occur in it; harmony and good discipline in the soul in respect of normal pleasures and pains; ... the state by which its possessor chooses and is cautious about what he should.

- Temperance is about self-control, of course, but particularly self-control applied to morally salient situations.

DICHOTOMY OF CONTROL

- The Stoic idea of the dichotomy of control allows us to translate the notion of living according to nature into a practical philosophy of life. This notion goes back to Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, but its most famous rendition is found right at the beginning of Epictetus's manual of Stoic ethical advice, *The Enchiridion*.
- Epictetus divides things into two major categories: what's under our control and what's not under our control. The first group includes our judgments, opinions, and values; the second group includes our body, reputation, career, and wealth, among other things.

- Understanding the dichotomy of control means that, practically speaking, we should focus on the things that are up to us and accept the rest for what it is. That translates into internalizing our goals. We should concern ourselves with our intentions and efforts (which are under our control) and develop an attitude of equanimity toward outcomes (which are not under our control).
- Do not worry about whether you will get that promotion at your job; do concern yourself with whether you've done everything possible to obtain the promotion. Do not worry about whether your spouse loves you; do concern yourself with whether you are a loving person.
- The theory is simple, but practice is difficult. If we truly internalize the dichotomy of control, we will achieve a life of freedom, serenity, and happiness.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Sellars, *Stoicism*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What did the Stoics mean by *ethics*?

Answer on page 181

THE STOICS ON DESIRE AND DISCIPLINE

According to Epictetus, a moral and serene life is attained if we train ourselves in three disciplines. The first, and the focus of this lesson, is learning to desire what is good for us and to be averse to what is bad for us. This lesson describes seven exercises on training our desires and aversions.

DICHOTOMY OF CONTROL EXERCISE

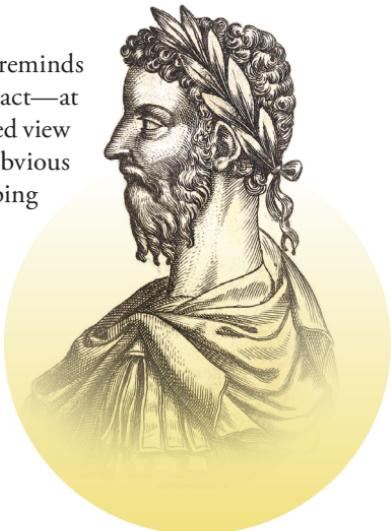
- The first exercise is about discovering what really is—and is not—up to us. Epictetus reminds us that what is truly up to us is limited to our deliberate thoughts, our decisions to act, and our endorsed values.
- Among the things that are not up to us are external goods, from the health of our body to our reputation, wealth, and success in love or career. We can certainly influence such things, but we do not determine them.
- To turn this insight into a regular exercise for everyday life, end the day by thinking over something important that happened to you that day. Do this before retiring for the evening. For instance, you may focus on a job review with your boss.
- Then, open up a blank page and divide it into two sections. On the left, list all the things pertinent to that event that were under your complete control. On the right, list all the things that were not under your control.

The structure for the next three lessons is taken from a book this course's presenter cowrote with Greg Lopez, titled *A Handbook for New Stoics: How to Thrive in a World Out of Your Control*. In it, they present 52 exercises, divided into three groups corresponding to the disciplines of Epictetus.

- In the case of the job review, some of the things up to you could include showing up on time, valuing your boss's opinion and feedback, desiring to have a productive meeting, and whatever nervous thoughts you consciously told yourself.
- Some things that were not up to you could include showing up on time (since you might have run into traffic or public transport delays), your boss's opinion and feedback, actually meeting expectations, having a constructive meeting, and any automatic nervous thoughts that entered your mind.
- The point of the exercise is to carefully and methodically apply Epictetus's distinction between what is and is not up to you and gradually redirect your attention away from external outcomes and toward internal intentions. If you succeed, not only will you be more serene, but statistically speaking, you will be more likely to achieve those desired outcomes.

CHARITABLE ATTITUDE EXERCISE

- The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius reminds us that we are imperfect and that we act—at least some of the time—from a misguided view of things. What we find blindingly obvious today we might have had trouble grasping in the past.
- So, why not extend a courtesy to others and treat their misguided beliefs with charity? Perhaps we can persuade others to see things from a better perspective. And if not, maybe we can endure their lack of wisdom more easily if we keep in mind that we could be in their place instead.
- For this exercise, reflect on someone whose behavior has annoyed you. Get a pen and paper and answer the following prompts as honestly and clearly as possible:



- What did the person do to annoy you?
 - Why do you feel this amounts to a wrong against you?
 - Why do you think they acted the way they did? What were they assuming to be true about the world that you think is incorrect?
 - Have you ever held similar assumptions about the world or engaged in similar behaviors? If so, make a list.
- The goal of the exercise is to gradually develop a more charitable attitude toward what you perceive as other people's mistakes. That, in turn, should lead you toward less frustration and a more constructive approach to these kinds of interactions.

SELF-DEPRIVATION EXERCISE

- Modern Stoics engage in a number of exercises of mild self-deprivation as a way to remind ourselves to be thankful for what we might take for granted and to reset what modern psychologists call the hedonic treadmill.
 - The hedonic treadmill is the notion that we get used to new and exciting things. When this happens, we abandon the old and seek new thrills, only to find ourselves in the same psychological predicament shortly thereafter. One way to reset the hedonic treadmill is to purposefully deprive ourselves of certain things for a short period of time so that we might appreciate them anew.
 - There are many self-deprivation exercises. Here are a few examples that this course's presenter practices.
- At least once a week, fast and abstain from alcohol. The next meal and sip of wine will be even more enjoyable after a day or two of abstaining.
 - Take a cold shower. Keep in mind that hot water on demand was not available to most people throughout history and is still missing, or rare, in some parts of the world.

- Occasionally go out in the cold or rain while underdressed for inclement weather. This reminds you that there are plenty of people who cannot afford a proper coat and that perhaps you can do something to ameliorate their situation.
- Select a week every month when you will buy nothing other than basic necessities, such as food and toilet paper. Write down the specific parameters you've chosen, listing what you will do without, for how long, and according to what schedule.
- The point is not to engage in self-flagellation but rather to engrain the notion that we can do without a lot of things we might have come to psychologically depend on. By doing so, we also nurture gratitude for the presence of things that make our lives more pleasant.

PERSPECTIVE EXERCISE

- The fourth exercise involves putting our troubles into a broader perspective and seeing them as less overwhelming than they might at first appear to be.
- There are three approaches to this practice. In each one, begin by choosing a quiet spot and a moment without distraction. Close your eyes and conjure one of the three following scenarios.
 - In the first, think of your present moment and begin a journey into the past. Zoom back a few decades to some specific event. Then move further back a few centuries, and then toward the beginning of human history, until you reach prehistory. Now, bring your mind back to whatever was troubling you today. Do you still think it matters that much in the big scheme of things?
 - In the second approach, put things in perspective by zooming out in space rather than in time. Begin by visualizing yourself in your current surroundings, then slowly move upward, looking at your building, your city, and finally the entire planet. Visualize the entire solar system, then the galaxy, and beyond. Now, quickly bring your mind back to contemplate your immediate problem. Does it still loom so large once you've examined things on a cosmic scale?

- Finally, think about your current problem—say, a job interview coming up—and compare it with other things people have had to face throughout history. Think about those who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness, or lost a loved one, or experienced war and destruction. Are you sure your job interview is that big of a deal?
- Doing this sort of exercise isn't meant to belittle your problems. But it helps to put things into a broader context—temporally, spatially, or by comparison with other people's problems—to see your issue realistically and not be overwhelmed by it.

CONNECTING WITH NATURE EXERCISE

- The fifth exercise aims at reconnecting us with nature and nurturing an understanding of the fact that we are inextricably connected to the cosmic web of cause and effect. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius wrote:

The Pythagoreans bid us every morning lift our eyes to heaven, to meditate upon the heavenly bodies pursuing their everlasting round—their order, their purity, their nakedness.
For no star wears a veil.

- Every once in a while, remember to check the weather forecast for the following morning and, if it's clear, set your alarm clock so that you can get out of bed before dawn and head to a spot that has a good view of the sunrise.
- Get there with plenty of time to spare and with a cup of coffee and the passage of *Meditations* in hand. All you need to do is stand or sit there quietly and absorb the moment. After the sun has risen, reread the passage and then begin your day refreshed by a renewed acquaintance with nature.
- Your imagination is the limit in terms of possible variants of this exercise. You could, for instance, spend a late evening looking at the starry sky, trying to spot meteorites, or engage purposefully in any other activity that has to do with nature, like hiking or kayaking. The important thing is to do it not just for recreational purposes but specifically as a meditation on your personal connection with nature.

LABELING EXERCISE

- The Stoics thought that there is only one thing that is truly good for us: our virtue, or our ability to arrive at correct, morally acceptable judgments. Conversely, there is only one thing that truly deserves to be called bad: our vice, which manifests itself any time we arrive at an incorrect, morally problematic judgment.
- Everything else might have practical value—in which case it is labelled a preferred indifferent—or practical disvalue—in which case it is called a dispreferred indifferent. Indifferents are not things that we don't care about but rather things that in themselves do not make us better or worse human beings. They are, in other words, morally neutral.
- Today, we use the words *good* and *bad* liberally, attaching them to anything and everything: That was a good dinner! That was a really bad soccer game! So, this exercise consists of going through an entire day—or, better yet, an entire week—without using the words *good* and *bad* for anything other than your own judgments.
- It comes so naturally to apply *good* or *bad* to almost everything, no matter how trivial, that you will catch yourself doing so a number of times. The underlying motive for this exercise is to reshape the way we automatically think about things, making us more parsimonious about applying labels to events, situations, and people.

EATING EXERCISE

- Eating, although fundamental for our survival and conducive to social intercourse, is a perfect time to exercise one of the four Stoic virtues: temperance. In practice, this means that every time you sit at the table, you should ask yourself the following:
 - Am I eating more than is good for me?
 - Am I eating too quickly, without savoring the food?
 - Am I eating unhealthy foods?
 - Am I serving my guests the same food, in the same portions, as myself?

- Is this a good time for a meal, or is there something more important I should be doing instead?
- Going through these questions will not only make you a better Stoic; you'll likely also be healthier and more welcome among your friends.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Pigliucci and Lopez, *A Handbook for New Stoics*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What is the discipline of desire?

Answer on page 181



THE STOICS ON INTERACTING WITH OTHERS

The second of Epictetus's three disciplines for a better life is action, which says that we should interact with other people as human beings worthy of the same respect that we wish to be accorded. Each exercise in this lesson begins with a pertinent quote from one of the ancient Stoics, followed by suggestions on how to practice the principle.

PEACE OF MIND EXERCISE

- The first exercise is inspired by the following passage from Epictetus, where he talks about the typical 1st-century Roman experience of going to the public baths:

When you are about to take something in hand, remind yourself what manner of thing it is. If you are going to bathe, put before your mind what happens in the bath—water pouring over some, others being jostled, some reviling, others stealing; and you will set to work more securely if you say to yourself at once: “I want to bathe, and I want to keep my will in harmony with nature,” and so in each thing you do. For in this way, if anything turns up to hinder you in your bathing, you will be ready to say, “I did not want only to bathe, but to keep my will in harmony with nature, and I shall not so keep it, if I go to pieces every time someone splashes some water on me.”

- If you know you're likely to encounter a frustrating situation, take a minute to visualize it in your mind before you get started. Second, mentally rehearse something like "I want to do this, but I also want to keep my harmony with nature." Third, visualize yourself behaving calmly under the circumstances.
- Research shows that this technique works in part because when we simulate something in our mind, we activate the same neural pathways that are turned on in the brain when we do the actual thing. It's almost like the brain evolved precisely to help us preempt problems before they occur.

TIME EXERCISE

- In *On the Shortness of Life*, the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca writes

You will hear many of those who are burdened by great prosperity cry out at times in the midst of their throngs of clients, or their pleadings in court, or their other glorious miseries: "I have no chance to live." Of course you have no chance! All those who summon you to themselves, turn you away from your own self. ... Check off, I say, and review the days of your life. ... Everyone hurries his life on and suffers from a yearning for the future and a weariness of the present. But he who bestows all of his time on his own needs, who plans out every day as if it were his last, neither longs for nor fears the morrow.

- In ancient Rome, life was just as cluttered with distractions and useless things to do as in the 21st century. The Stoic take begins with the observation that human life is finite, and how we use our time is crucially important.
- For this exercise, set aside a few minutes at the end of your day and draw up a table with three columns. The first will contain some activity you've done. The second column will answer the question of whether you think that activity made you a better person or fulfilled an important role. The last column will answer the question of would you do this on your last day of life.

- Fill out the table and then take stock. How many things were fulfilling or important? How many would you do on your last day? If an activity didn't make it into the second or the third column, you might want to reexamine its worth and whether you want to remain committed to it.

SMALL TALK EXERCISE

- To begin the third exercise, here is a simple yet difficult-to-implement suggestion from Epictetus in *The Enchiridion*:

Be silent for the most part, or, if you speak, say only what is necessary and in a few words. Talk, but rarely, if occasion calls you, but do not talk of ordinary things, of gladiators, or horse races, or athletes, or of meats or drinks—these are topics that arise everywhere—but above all do not talk about men in blame or compliment or comparison.

- Maybe you aren't particularly tempted to talk about gladiators these days, but the other things Epictetus lists still make up much small talk as engaged in at the office, at parties, or with close friends and family. We tend to talk too much, and yet much of the time we don't say a lot that is actually worth paying attention to. So, the first notion is to curb our enthusiasm for talking irrespective of the quality of our speech.
- In order to practice this exercise, you will have to engage in two steps.
- First, write a list of things that you tend to talk too much about so that you will be aware of what topics you need to avoid. Having the list will help you catch yourself before you start going on and on about gladiators and such.
- Second, make a mental note to silently recite an effective reminder whenever you catch yourself speaking of things from your list. For instance, if you notice that you have a tendency to gossip when you get together with a particular friend, tell yourself ahead of time that when you see Mark, you will silently tell yourself not to gossip.

- One difficulty you'll likely encounter is that you'll feel a strong psychological pressure to say something in a social situation to avoid embarrassing silences. But pause and ask yourself: What is embarrassing about silence? Is it really better to open your mouth and talk at random rather than to sit quietly and listen to others, or even to the sound of silence?

VIRTUE EXERCISE

- The fourth exercise is also based on Epictetus's *Enchiridion*:

Refuse the entertainments of strangers and the vulgar. But if occasion arise to accept them, then strain every nerve to avoid lapsing into the state of the vulgar. For know that, if your comrade have a stain on him, he that associates with him must needs share the stain, even though he be clean in himself.

- What Epictetus means by “the vulgar” is people who are not good influences. The point is a serious one, and it’s backed up by modern empirical research. If we want to become better human beings, we need to stay away from people who reinforce our bad habits and instead expose ourselves to the company of those who will help us improve by way of their example.
- In practical terms, here’s how you can do this exercise. Create a table with four columns.
- The first column will contain your list of people who might not be good for your virtue, so to speak.
- In the second column, write down which specific behaviors or moods you’d like to avoid and that you’ve noticed are associated with particular individuals. Let’s say, for instance, that you’re trying to reduce the amount of gossip you engage in, and yet your friend Mark really loves gossiping.

Suppose you’re trying to kick a smoking habit. Do you think this is more likely to happen if you hang out with other smokers, or if you spend time with people who have quit already and are trying to stick with their new healthy habit?

- In the third column, ask yourself whether it's possible to reduce your exposure to Mark without avoiding your social responsibilities. Maybe Mark is a close friend of your partner, for instance, or he's a relative. That means you can't just avoid him, though you might still be able to figure out ways to reduce your exposure.
- The last column will contain your plan on how to reduce your exposure to Mark. And if that can't be done, it will contain a positive reminder that—Mark or no Mark—you really want to avoid gossiping.
- Remember, you are not doing this in order to become a snob, but to improve as a member of the human cosmopolis. And modern science shows that it actually works!

INSULT EXAMPLE

- In *The Enchiridion*, Epictetus says

If someone tells you that so and so speaks ill of you, do not defend yourself against what he says, but answer, “He did not know my other faults, or he would not have mentioned these alone.”

- From a Stoic's perspective, insults are a complete waste of emotional resources. Concerning the content of the perceived insult, there are only two possibilities at play: Either the person in question is right in criticizing you, or they aren't. If they're right—no matter how rudely they might have expressed the criticism—the rational thing for you to do is thank them for pointing out something you need to work on. If they're wrong, the joke is on them, since they're the one making a mistake.
- All you can control is your reaction to the perceived insult. In the passage, Epictetus suggests reacting with a bit of humor, which is great if you can muster it. Yet eliciting a reaction is precisely what someone wants when they insult you. If you just walk away, they will be the one feeling stupid or enraged. That, of course, is their problem, not yours.

- To put this insight into action, the obvious thing is to deploy some of the techniques you've already learned, like thinking ahead about possible delicate situations and simulating in your mind how you will react.
- Remember, a prepared mind handles problems far better than a mind that is caught off guard. But if the situation arises unexpectedly, you will try to channel your inner Epictetus and do the simplest thing of them all: walk away. You will then feel in control and pretty virtuous for not having stooped to the level of the other person.

ADVERSITY EXERCISE

- The sixth exercise is inspired by the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, who in his book the *Meditations* wrote

When you wake, say to yourself: “Today I shall encounter meddling, ingratitude, violence, cunning, jealousy, self-seeking; all of them the results of men not knowing what is good and what is evil. But seeing that I have beheld the nature and nobility of good, and the nature and meanness of evil, and the nature of the sinner, who is my brother, participating not indeed in the same flesh and blood, but in the same mind and partnership with the divine, I cannot be injured by any of them; for no man can involve me in what demeans. Neither can I be angry with my brother, or quarrel with him; for we are made for cooperation, like the feet, the hands, the eyelids, the upper and the lower rows of teeth. To thwart one another is contrary to nature; and one form of thwarting is resentment and estrangement.”

- There are several important things here. First, that we will encounter unreasonable, ungrateful, jealous, or selfish people is a fact of life. We should be mentally prepared for this to happen.
- Second, those ungrateful, jealous, or selfish people are nevertheless our brothers and sisters in the human cosmopolis. And surely, we ourselves have at times behaved unreasonably. We should cultivate an attitude of understanding and forgiveness about others, just as we would like others to understand and forgive us.

- Lastly, as Marcus says, it's better for us to learn to work with difficult people. Since we don't have the option of magically conjuring a world where everyone is nice and altruistic, the rational thing to do is to work with the people we have, not with those we wish we had.
- If you know you will likely encounter difficult people today, spend a few minutes in the morning writing down your meditation on adversity. Make sure you write something in respect to all three of Marcus's points.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Pigliucci and Lopez, *A Handbook for New Stoics*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What is the discipline of action?

Answer on page 181



THE STOICS ON DECISION-MAKING

The third and last of Epictetus's disciplines is the discipline of assent, which is concerned with improving our ability to arrive at correct judgments so that we always act in the best way possible. In a sense, the discipline of assent is a refinement of the other two, as it makes it easier and smoother to practice desire and aversion as well as action.

IMPLEMENTATION INTENTION EXERCISE

- The first exercise is based on Marcus Aurelius's four examples of mental weakness: needless fancy, being antisocial, not speaking from the heart, and refusing to forgive yourself.
- How many times have you fallen for one or more of these moods of the mind only to regret it later on? For this exercise, pick one of the four moods to focus on.
- Let's say that speaking from the heart is difficult for you, as you tend to want to please people. At the beginning of the first day, write a note to yourself saying that you intend to do a certain thing—what in modern psychological therapy is called an implementation intention.
- For instance, your implementation intention might read something like: "Whenever I feel the impulse to please people, I will not act immediately on it."
- It might also be useful to keep track of how many times a week you feel the need to please people and how many times you were able to counter the impulse. It's OK to slip up once in a while. But with time, you should notice that the problematic behavior becomes less frequent.

PRECEPTS EXERCISE

- In his 71st letter to his friend Lucilius, Seneca makes an analogy between the precepts of Stoicism and a wool cloth that gradually and thoroughly absorbs its color from being soaked in dye. Just like it takes time to properly color a garment, so it takes time to color one's soul.
- We can imbue our souls with Stoic philosophy by keeping a number of short phrases ready at hand as constant and easy reminders of what we should do as Stoic practitioners. Every practitioner has their own list of favorite precepts, but here are five choices to get you started.
- **Virtue is the only true good.** When we say that virtue is the only true good, we mean that for a Stoic, the overarching aim is to act pro-socially, with the good of the human cosmopolis in mind. This precept reminds us that we should use everything else—money, property, and so on—in the service of the common good, not for selfish ends.
- **Some things are up to me; others are not up to me.** This is often referred to as the dichotomy of control. Only our judgments, considered opinions, and endorsed values are truly up to us. We might be able to influence outcomes, but ultimately, they are determined by factors outside of our control. That's why reciting this Stoic precept before a job interview or a first date will remind us that we should focus on maximizing our efforts and accept whatever comes with equanimity.
- **Nothing lasts forever.** Reminding ourselves that nothing lasts forever can be helpful in countless circumstances. For instance, you're having a long day at work. The good news is that it won't last forever! Another thing that won't last forever, of course, is your physical being. Since you don't know how much time you have left, why not skip the stuff that's unimportant and focus on what you want to get done in life?
- **Everything changes.** This Greek aphorism predates the Stoics, going back to the philosopher Heraclitus, whose metaphysics strongly influenced the Stoic view of the world. Even things that might seem not to change—like mountains and continents—evolve over time, though at such a slow pace that the change might be imperceptible to the human eye. Change is normal, so it's senseless to resist it. Kids grow up, friends move to other places, jobs are lost and found, and we grow older.

■ **I will do it, fate permitting.** To a Stoic, the word *fate* doesn't have to be interpreted in terms of the existence of a grand plan laid out for the whole universe. It might simply mean that we have the intention of doing a given thing, but we're also aware that something outside of our control could get in the way. For example, you will deliver that report to your boss at the end of the month—unless something serious prevents you from completing it. The point is not to give ourselves excuses to back away from our commitments but rather to be realistic that while our intentions are up to us, the outcomes of our actions are not entirely at our command.

TEMPERANCE EXERCISE

- The next exercise is inspired by a passage in Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* in which he reminds himself that he likes certain pleasures of the flesh—exotic food, wine, and sex—to too much, and that it's wiser for him to practice temperance.
- This exercise is meant to help us bring strong urges under control by redescribing the objects of our desires in a more detached fashion—stripping them of the value judgments that we automatically imposed but that are not in fact part of them.
- For instance, if you are too fond of wine, remind yourself that what you prize is just fermented grape juice. The point is not to take away but rather to moderate such desires and prevent you from feeling too virtuous when, in fact, you aren't.

ANGER EXERCISE

- The next exercise, inspired by Seneca's book *On Anger*, concerns one of the major issues that worried the Stoics: outbursts of anger. Seneca considered these fits of emotion to be a kind of temporary madness.
- He tells us not to try to control anger, which is next to impossible, but rather to disengage from the situation so that our anger subsides on its own. Then, and only then, will we be in a position to reengage rationally and see what needs to be done.

- Disengagement for the purpose of gaining some cognitive distance between you and your anger can be done in a number of ways. They're simple but effective techniques, including taking a walk, retiring to another room for a few minutes, counting to 20, reciting the alphabet, or engaging in a few deep breaths. Once we've recovered our composure, we can engage in calm analytical thinking.
- When we recognize the initial symptoms of anger, we have a small window of opportunity to disengage before the anger develops and pushes reason aside. Once we've regained our composure, we can engage in an exercise of cognitive self-challenge by trying to convince our more emotional self that there really is nothing to get angry about.
- To carry out this exercise, reflect on an episode of anger that you've experienced recently. Write down the specifics. For instance, create a table with two columns: one labeled "object of anger" and the other labeled "possible rebuttals." Then populate the table with your specific example. The goal is to move toward preventing a similar occurrence in the future by preparing yourself to deal with the source of anger.

Studies show the best boxers are those who keep their cool in the ring. Those who get angry start throwing ineffective punches, driven by their rage instead of their brains, and they tend to lose the fight.

JUDGMENT EXERCISE

- The last exercise for the discipline of assent comes from Epictetus's *Enchiridion*. He states:

If a man wash quickly, do not say that he washes badly, but that he washes quickly. If a man drink much wine, do not say that he drinks badly, but that he drinks much. For until you have decided what judgment prompts him, how do you know that he acts badly?

- The idea is that we should be careful in judging others. Often, we simply don't know enough about other people and their motivations to arrive at a sound judgment of what they're doing. And other people's actions are up to them—not us—and we should focus on improving our own judgments.
- The way to practice this is as follows: For a full day, or a full week, every time you catch yourself judging someone, stop and rephrase the situation in more neutral terms. For instance, suppose you're a food snob. Instead of saying, "I can't believe that guy is putting Parmesan cheese on pasta with seafood," say, "that guy is combining culinary ingredients in a way different from what most Italians would."
- The point is that the world would be significantly better if we followed the Stoic advice of being less judgmental of others and more focused on improving ourselves.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Pigliucci and Lopez, *A Handbook for New Stoics*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What is the discipline of assent?

Answer on page 181

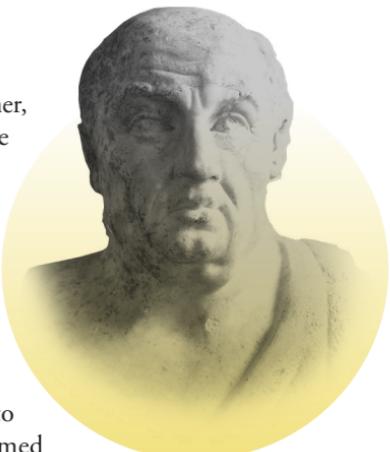


SENECA'S LETTERS TO LUCILIUS

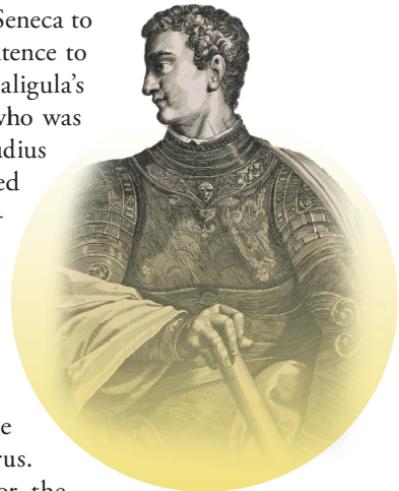
This lesson looks in detail at some of the 124 letters Seneca wrote to his friend Lucilius. All were written during Seneca's last few years, and they form a sort of informal curriculum on Stoic philosophy.

SENECA'S LIFE

- In the year 65, a great statesman, philosopher, and playwright was ordered to death by the increasingly unhinged Roman emperor Nero. The man in question is Lucius Annaeus Seneca, known as Seneca the Younger.
- Seneca lived an eventful life. In his mid-20s, he was struck by tuberculosis and moved to Egypt to be nursed back to health by his aunt. Upon his return to Rome about a decade later, Seneca resumed his political career. But this was cut short by the empress Messalina, the third wife of the emperor Claudius, who reigned from 41 to 54.
- Messalina accused Seneca of adultery with a sister of the late emperor Caligula, who reigned from 37 to 41. The accusation probably was unfounded. It's more likely that Messalina wanted to be rid of Caligula's sister, Julia, and her supporters, including Seneca.



- In the year 41, the Senate condemned Seneca to death, but Claudius commuted the sentence to exile.* Then, in the year 49, another of Caligula's sisters, Agrippina, married Claudius, who was also her uncle. Agrippina convinced Claudius to recall Seneca from exile. Claudius died in the year 54, at which point Nero—Agrippina's son, who had been adopted by Claudius—became emperor.
- From 54 to 62, Seneca was Nero's advisor, and he was initially successful at keeping the young emperor in check with the help of the prefect of the praetorian guard, Sextus Afranius Burrus. Soon, however, things took a turn for the worse. Nero murdered his mother, Agrippina—even as she was plotting against him—and Seneca was forced to write a letter of explanation to the Roman senate.
- Burrus died in the year 62, and it was increasingly difficult for Seneca to control Nero. Then, in the year 65, a conspiracy to remove Nero from power was organized by the Roman senator Gaius Calpurnius Piso. There's no evidence that Seneca participated, though he very likely knew about it and did not inform the emperor. After the conspiracy failed, Nero ordered Seneca to commit suicide.
- The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that Seneca attended to his correspondence and put his affairs in order before slitting his wrists. But he was emaciated by then, and not enough blood emptied from his wounds to do the job. So he took poison, just like his role model, Socrates. When that didn't work either, he had a hot bath prepared, and he suffocated in the steam.
- Fortunately, Seneca was a prolific writer, and what survives is by far the largest extant documentation of ancient Stoicism.



* To add to his personal tragedy, Seneca's only son died a few weeks before he was banished to the rugged island of Corsica.

LUCILIUS JUNIOR

- Lucilius Junior was a procurator of Sicily during Nero's reign. We don't know much about Lucilius other than what Seneca himself says in his letters. He was probably from Pompeii, likely became governor of Sicily, and wrote poetry on scientific subjects. None of his correspondence with Seneca survives, but it's obvious from what we have that the two men were close friends.

TIME

- The first letter Seneca wrote to Lucilius was about how to use time in the best way possible, since we don't know how many days we have available to us. Seneca wrote, "Hold every hour in your grasp. Lay hold of to-day's task, and you will not need to depend so much upon to-morrow's. While we are postponing, life speeds by."
- He adds that while money can be returned with interest, nobody can return to us the time we've invested in them. Our friends, he writes, "never regard themselves as in debt when they have received some of that precious commodity—time! And yet time is the one loan which even a grateful recipient cannot repay."
- Seneca also remarks that we seem to squander much of the time we do have. He writes:

If you will pay close heed to the problem, you will find that the largest portion of our life passes while we are doing ill, a goodly share while we are doing nothing, and the whole while we are doing that which is not to the purpose.

- Stoicism is meant to be practical, and there's nothing more important for us than to reflect on how we spend time. According to the Stoics, our life is made meaningful precisely by the fact that it is finite and we never know when the last day will come. That's Seneca famously said that the whole point of philosophy is, in a sense, to teach us how to die day-by-day.

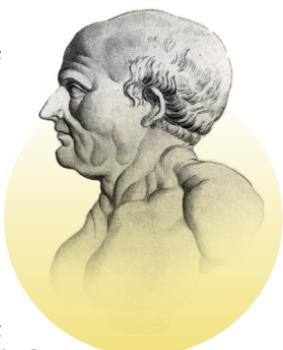
ROLE MODELS

- In the seventh letter, Seneca writes: “Associate with those who will make a better human being of you. Welcome those whom you yourself can improve.”
- This is essentially advice to be careful of the company you keep. It’s also a particular application of the advice to use your time well. Hanging around with people who will influence you negatively is a sure waste of time, while sticking with good friends who will help you grow is a positive reciprocal investment.
- Seneca’s 11th letter discusses choosing role models to pattern our behavior after so as to improve ourselves as human beings:

Choose therefore a Cato, or, if Cato seems too severe a model, choose some Laelius, a gentler spirit. Choose a master whose life, conversation, and soul-expressing face have satisfied you; picture them always to yourself as your protector or your pattern. For we must indeed have someone according to whom we may regulate our characters; you can never straighten that which is crooked unless you use a ruler.

If you had to name one or two role models in your own life, either people you know personally or have heard about, who would you choose?

- Cato was a Roman senator who committed suicide to avoid capture by Julius Caesar and being used for political advantage. As Seneca recognizes, not everyone will be inspired by the stern Cato. So, we can choose another, gentler soul, like that of Gaius Laelius Sapiens, a friend and confidante of the Roman general and statesman Scipio Aemilianus.
- The point, as Seneca says by way of metaphor, is that we need to straighten our character. But it will be difficult to do so unless we adopt a standard of measure with which to compare ourselves.



COSMOPOLITANISM

- Letter 28 covers two interesting topics, one practical and the other philosophically important. He says that many people think traveling will solve their problems, as they see new places and meet new people. But while there are good reasons to travel—like learning about other cultures—solving your problems isn’t one of them. The reason is that wherever you travel, your personal baggage travels with you. And if your problems are internally generated, then it won’t matter where you are physically. Those same issues will follow you everywhere.
- That said, Seneca declares: “I am not born for any one corner of the universe; this whole world is my country.” This is the Stoic doctrine of cosmopolitanism, derived from Socrates, who allegedly was the first to use the word. *Cosmopolitanism* means “citizen of the world.” It’s an ancient ideal that we still struggle to enact.
- The Stoics thought that what unites us as human beings is far more important than what divides us. To live a virtuous life means to apply reason to the improvement of social living, regardless of artificial national borders.
- Another important insight comes in letter 42, where Seneca addresses the fact that so many of us have set the wrong priorities in life. We think wealth, fame, and power will make us happy, when there’s plenty of evidence that they won’t. Seneca says we sell ourselves cheap in order to obtain things that do not contribute to our happiness.
- Indeed, modern research shows that very few people on their deathbeds wish they’d gotten a bit more money or fame. But almost all of them regret not having spent more time with their loved ones, or having failed to build more solid friendships.

SLAVERY

- Letter 47 is important because it addresses the issue of slavery. Slavery in the ancient world was taken for granted, as natural in human existence. The Roman economy was largely built on slavery and would have collapsed without it. Almost no ancient commentator is on record as raising any issue about this practice, but the Stoics are an exception.*^{**}

* Zeno of Citium, the founder of the sect, wrote in his book *Republic* that slavery is evil.

- Seneca says, “Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies.”
- Moreover, he says that in a deeper sense, we are all slaves, only most of us don’t realize it: “Show me a human being who is not a slave; one is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, and all are slaves to fear.”

AGING AND DEATH

- In his 58th letter, Seneca says that we tend to resist change without appreciating that it is the rule throughout the cosmos. Indeed, there would be no life if things didn’t change. This is a reason why the Stoics strive not to be worried about death, viewing it as just another change affecting the lump of matter we call our body.
- Aging is also change, of course. And in letter 58, Seneca addresses it directly:

I shall not abandon old age, if old age preserves me intact for myself, and intact as regards the better part of myself; but if old age begins to shatter my mind, and to pull its various faculties to pieces, if it leaves me, not life, but only the breath of life, I shall rush out of a house that is crumbling and tottering.

- This is not because the Stoics do not value life. On the contrary, it’s precisely because they value a well-lived human life. Yet they also understand that change and decay are biological inevitabilities. So, they think it reasonable to leave the world on one’s own terms.
- Death is tightly linked with grief, and the 63rd letter addresses precisely that aspect of the human experience. The Stoic take here is surprisingly upbeat. Instead of focusing on loss, we should rejoice at the memory of what we enjoyed. Seneca writes, “Fortune has taken away, but Fortune has given. Let us greedily enjoy our friends, because we do not know how long this privilege will be ours.”

- In letter 67, we find yet another theme related to death and suffering: illness. Seneca writes: “Nor am I so mad as to crave illness; but if I must suffer illness, I shall desire that I may do nothing which shows lack of restraint, and nothing that is unvirtuous.”
- Far from being the philosophy of going around with a stiff upper lip, Stoicism accepts that illness, grief, and death are inevitable. The question, then, is how best to respond to them. Their occurrence is not up to us, but how we deal with illness, death, and grief most certainly is.

EXTERNAL GOODS AND CONSUMERISM

- For Stoics, externals like wealth and property had value so long as they didn’t get in the way of a virtuous and moral life. Even so, Seneca counsels restraint. In letter 87, he speaks from the vantage point of his by-then long life:

The journey showed me this: how much we possess that is superfluous; and how easily we can make up our minds to do away with things whose loss, whenever it is necessary to part with them, we do not feel.

- Stoicism, it would appear, is no friend of consumerism. Seneca returns to this theme near the end of the letters, at number 110, where he writes that life is marked by inevitable change, and our only option is in choosing how to deal with change. If we lose wealth or property, we haven’t really lost anything important, but only something that was borrowed from the universe. If we fall sick, it is up to us to bear the situation well. And when the last test of our character approaches, we can look at death and say: I have prepared for you all my life. My philosophy has taught me how to deal even with you.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

- ↗ Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*.

QUESTION

- ↗ In the letters to Lucilius, what is Seneca’s take on how to best use our time?

Answer on page 181



SENECA ON ANGER MANAGEMENT

A lot of what the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca wrote in his famous book *On Anger* nearly 2,000 years ago has been confirmed by modern empirical research in cognitive science. This lesson explores where the Stoic take on negative emotions diverges from that of the American Psychological Association.

CATEGORIES OF EMOTION

- Stoics divide what we call emotions into three broad categories: *propathetiai*, *pathē*, and *eupatheiai*.



- *Propatheiai*, or proto-emotions, are essentially involuntary emotional reactions. They're natural, inevitable, and probably beneficial, as they are a physiological signal that urges us to focus our attention on whatever is going on at the moment. The Stoics and modern psychology both accept that involuntary emotions such as these can take momentary control of our ability to think and even act.
- The second category, the *pathē*, covers what we think of as reactive passions, such as fear and desire. The Stoics were in favor of minimizing or even erasing these from our mental makeup.
- The *eupatheiai* are positive emotions, such as joy, and are thought consistent with rational behavior.
- The Stoics and modern cognitive scientists agree that fully formed emotions—that is, whatever comes after our initial instinctive reaction to a situation—have a cognitive component. As such, we can train ourselves to argue against the first judgment that we associate with a particular emotion.* If we succeed, this will change the way we feel about the ongoing situation.

NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

- The Stoic's two categories of cognitive emotions are where the Stoic take diverges from that of the American Psychological Association, and for interesting reasons.
- Any given proto-emotion may develop into a full-fledged emotion by way of the addition of an implicit or explicit judgment. And in any particular situation, our judgment might be correct or incorrect. The Stoics at this point make an interesting move. They say that proto-emotions can develop into either *pathē*, the negative or unhealthy emotions, or into *eupatheiai*, the positive or healthy emotions.
- Factually speaking, the Stoic description of what happens is pretty much the same as that of the American Psychological Association: Negative emotions that overcome reason can lead to lasting destructive behaviors that destroy relationships, job performance, and so forth.

* This approach is the basis of cognitive behavioral therapy, the most successful evidence-based type of psychotherapy available today.

- But the Stoics disagree in terms of prescription. While professional psychologists recognize that negative emotions can be harmful, the professional trade group also contends that such negative responses are normal and can also be good, in some small measure.
- Essentially, this is the Aristotelian position about emotions, which predates the Stoics by a few decades. The Stoics engaged in a long debate with the Aristotelians on this point, denying that anything good can come of negative emotions. Indeed, a great part of Stoic training consists of shifting our emotional spectrum away from negative emotions and toward the active cultivation of positive ones.

THE STOIC TREATMENT OF ANGER

- This lesson now turns to what Seneca says about anger, which the Stoics considered the quintessential example of a negative emotion.
- In his book *On Anger*, Seneca says that anger is “deaf to reason and advice.” He’s giving us the Stoic definition of *pathos*,** the singular noun for a negative emotion. An unhealthy emotion is defined as one that shoves reason away and takes control of our actions in spite of our better judgment.
- Seneca then makes the point that is also the basis of Buddhist philosophy: Anger is destructive and the major cause of the suffering that human beings inflict on one another. That is why both in Stoicism and in Buddhism, the treatment and complete rejection of anger is so fundamental.
- It’s important to note that this is true regardless of the cause that triggers anger. We might become angry for puerile reasons—for instance, because someone cuts us off on the highway—or for good reasons—for example, in response to a blatant injustice that we see perpetrated. Either way, once we kick reason out the window and allow our indignation to build into rage, we’re probably going to regret what we’re about to do.
- Seneca also argues—opposite of the American Psychological Association position—that anger should not be considered natural, in the specific Stoic sense of the word. He writes: “Mankind is born for mutual assistance, anger for mutual ruin: the former loves society, the latter estrangement.”

** Incidentally, this is the Greek root of our word *pathology*.

- The whole point of human existence to the Stoics is to live in accordance with the best aspects of human nature: our ability to reason and our sociability. Obviously, that clashes with an emotion that overcomes reason and leads to antisocial behavior.

OBJECTIONS TO THE STOIC TREATMENT OF ANGER

- The most common objection to the Stoic take on anger is that anger can be useful. Seneca writes:

“What, then,” asks our adversary, “is a good man not to be angry if he sees his father murdered or his mother outraged?”
No, he will not be angry, but will avenge them, or protect them. Why do you fear that filial piety will not prove a sufficient spur to him even without anger?

- Why do we need anger to motivate us to do the right thing? Why isn’t our sense of justice sufficient?
- Seneca continues:

“Anger is useful,” says our adversary, “because it makes men more ready to fight.” According to that mode of reasoning, drunkenness also is a good thing, for it makes men insolent and daring, and many use their weapons better when the worse for liquor.

- Seneca explains the Stoics’ moral objection to anger this way: “A good judge condemns wrongful acts, but does not hate them.” This is the Stoic version of hate the sin but not the sinner. It acknowledges that people do wrong for all sorts of reasons. They are mistaken, sometimes tragically so. And the error must be corrected or prevented, if possible. But there’s no need to go further toward expressing anger or hate.
- Far better, Seneca believed, to give reason a chance. Reason strives to arrive at a just decision. Anger, by contrast, is in a hurry. It wants to be thought of as just without careful consideration.

ANGER AS A COGNITIVE EMOTION

- Seneca tells us that we're mistaken when we say things like "I couldn't help feeling that way." Of course we can. Emotions are a combination of initial feelings and cognitive assent. The first component might be unavoidable, but the second one—with training—can be brought under our control.
- Take, for instance, the notion of a crime of passion, as when someone discovers that their spouse has betrayed them and decides to address the situation by acting violently. The notion relies on the assumption that one can't help reacting in a violent way if faced with flagrant betrayal. But a Stoic would respond that there is much unexamined cognition going on—including, for instance, the notion that being betrayed by one's spouse is a bad thing. This is not necessarily under your control, the Stoics would argue, and might even be a blessing. Better to find out now rather than later that a person you thought loved you is untrustworthy.
- The point is that situations do not force particular judgments on us. Rather, our judgments are the result of our choices of values and our deliberations. That means they are up to us.
- Seneca presents us with an interesting twist on anger management when he explains that there are times when we might pretend to be angry in order to achieve a particular result. But even then, we are well-served by maintaining our inner calm. In a sense, this is like acting. The actor doesn't really feel the emotions that they project on stage or on camera.
- Think of it in terms of pretending to be upset with a child in order to move them to do the right thing. The child is incapable of sophisticated reasoning, and it's not their fault if they behave like a child. But it would be immature to actually get upset with the child.
- And do you remember the last time you got angry at an animal or at your computer? Seneca reminds us that we can't label something as wrong unless it's done on purpose. Computers don't freeze up intentionally. And your dog didn't chew on your book to spite you. So, to get mad at the computer or the dog is truly foolish.

- Ultimately, Seneca argues that anger is morally problematic. He points out that anger focuses not on pleasure for ourselves but on the pain we inflict on others. Anger is against human nature, turning us into unthinking animals bent on destruction instead of fostering the sort of positive feelings that represent the best side of humanity, such as love and a desire to do good.
- Far better, Seneca continues, to equip ourselves with anti-anger armor that makes alleged injuries and insults simply bounce off of us because they cannot hurt us. To seek revenge or to get angry with someone is an obvious admission that the person has been successful at what they wanted to do: hurt us.

ANGER MANAGEMENT

- We also get practical advice from Seneca on how to avoid getting angry in the first place—advice in line with that given by the American Psychological Association two millennia later.
- Want to avoid getting angry? Play some music, or engage in other relaxing activities. Paint your apartment or house in soothing colors. Don't start a discussion with someone when you're tired or hungry, because you'll be cranky and more prone to getting upset.
- The Stoics also invite us to ask ourselves why people might wish to offend in the first place. Modern psychologists also recommend this exercise of taking the other person's perspective before reacting to perceived insults. Do you think the world in general, and you in particular, would be worse off if we chose to cultivate understanding and sympathy instead of anger and outrage?
- One last technique that Seneca gives us is the evening philosophical diary, which can not only help us disarm anger but address any of our shortcomings and deficiencies. He writes:

The spirit ought to be brought up for examination daily. It was the custom of Sextius when the day was over, and he had betaken himself to rest, to inquire of his spirit: “What bad habit of yours have you cured to-day? What vice have you checked? In what respect are you better?”

- Carrying out this exercise can be a journey of self-discovery and self-improvement. It can calm our anger and make us more understanding of our fellow human beings.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*.

QUESTION

- ↗ Why does Seneca say that anger is “temporary madness”?

Answer on page 181



SENECA ON GRIEF AND DISTRESS

Letters of consolation were a popular philosophical genre in ancient Rome. Their purpose was both to offer private condolences and to be available for later publication as vehicles for imparting more general philosophical teachings. This lesson focuses on Seneca's three letters of consolation and examines how the Stoic system of beliefs and practices treats grief and distress.

LETTER TO MARCIA

- Seneca composed his letter of consolation to his friend Marcia some three years after she lost one of her adult sons. Seneca explains that it is time for her to resume her life—that she owes this to her remaining children, her husband, her friends, and Roman society at large. Seneca counsels that while it is natural to grieve for a loss, the strong medicine of philosophy will help her move on.
- Setting the stage for his plan of action, Seneca writes:

There is no great credit in behaving bravely in times of prosperity, when life glides easily with a favoring current; neither does a calm sea and fair wind display the art of the pilot. Some foul weather is wanted to prove his courage.

- Everyone is a good pilot in calm waters. It's only once the storm begins that we'll see what we're made of. Seneca's observation is not meant to belittle Marcia but to remind her that she is a strong woman, capable of facing the adversities in life.
- Now, Seneca imagines Marcia replying in her own defense:

“But,” say you, “sorrow for the loss of one’s own children is natural.” Who denies it? Provided it be reasonable? For we cannot help feeling a pang, and the stoutest-hearted of us are cast down not only at the death of those dearest to us, but even when they leave us on a journey.

- Seneca is sympathetic to Marcia’s grief and acknowledges that her reaction is natural. Nevertheless, he exhorts Marcia to be reasonable. This might strike us as nonsensical or callous. But grief is an emotion, and emotions have two components: a physiological, automatic reaction and a cognitive reaction. Being reasonable means that Marcia should question the cognitive component of her grief, given that it is getting in the way of resuming a normal life.
- A bit later in the letter, Seneca says that we all know that tragedy strikes, and yet we somehow fail to internalize this notion, thinking that financial problems, disease, and death are things that happen to others, not us. The price to pay for such indulgence is high. When catastrophe strikes, we are caught unprepared. The advantage of a prepared mind, by contrast, is that it is less easy to shock and recovers more quickly. It’s ready to take stock of the situation and implement whatever strategy may resolve or soften the blow.
- Moving forward in the letter, Seneca shifts strategy. He writes that everything is borrowed from the universe, and the universe will take it back.* Now, Seneca again imagines another objection from Marcia:

In ancient times, women did not exactly enjoy high status. But the Stoics believed that women are as intellectually capable as men, and therefore that they can study, practice philosophy, and achieve a eudaimonic life.

“But,” say you, “it might have lasted longer.” True, but you have been better dealt with than if you had never had a son, for, supposing you were given your choice, which is the better lot, to be happy for a short time or not at all?

* This notion is similar to the Buddhist one of nonattachment.

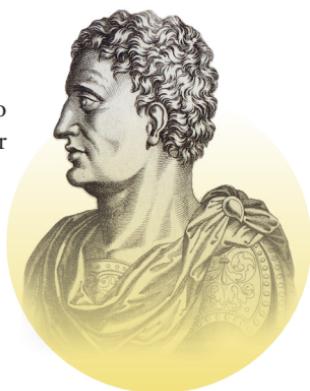
- This is the Stoic version of seeing the glass half full rather than half empty. Stoics are often accused of taking a rather dire view of life, but they strive to face reality for what it is and redirect their attention to what is under their control. The glass, in reality, is both half full and half empty. But why focus on regretting the empty part rather than on enjoying the full one?
- Finally, Seneca explains that death is the cessation of conscious activity, which means that we cease to exist. As such, the state of death cannot be experienced. So, it follows that we should not pay attention to tall tales about the afterlife related by poets and priests. Marcia can be at peace regarding the fate of her son, and so can we whenever we lose a loved one.

LETTER TO HELVIA

- Seneca's second letter of consolation was addressed to his mother, Helvia. It was probably written in the year 42 or 43, a year or two after the emperor Claudius sent Seneca into exile. In it, he acknowledges that he is in the paradoxical position of being the cause of her distress and also the source of potential consolation.
- This letter contains another series of lessons illustrating how Stoics deal with adversity. Seneca writes:

External circumstances have very little importance either for good or for evil: the wise man is neither elated by prosperity nor depressed by adversity; for he has always endeavored to depend chiefly upon himself and to derive all his joys from himself.

- This relates to the Stoic principle of the dichotomy of control—that some things are up to us, while others are not. Our best bet at happiness is to focus on what we control. This doesn't mean that it's all the same to Seneca whether he lives in exile or in Rome with his family. Given that it's not in Seneca's power to be recalled from exile, he resolves to make the best of the situation.



- When someone was sent into exile in ancient Rome, they did not have access to the luxuries of life. Seneca comments on this in typical Stoic fashion, indicting a lifestyle that relies too much on external goods. He points out that human bodies are too small to process the large amounts of rare foodstuff that wealthy people might think is necessary to their lives. The same criticism could extend to the notion of buying many cars, houses, and so forth.
- Seneca ends his letter to his mother on a cheerful note, meant to relieve her grief and convey the Stoic attitude toward his predicament:

I am as joyous and cheerful as in my best days: indeed these days are my best, because my mind is relieved from all pressure of business and is at leisure to attend to its own affairs, and at one time amuses itself with lighter studies, at another eagerly presses its inquiries into its own nature and that of the universe.

Modern research in psychology confirms Seneca's intuition: Money does not augment people's happiness or sense of meaning—indeed, it makes them constantly unsatisfied because they think they don't quite have enough or as much as they deserve.

- This is a clear example of the Stoic principle that the good and the bad in life do not depend on circumstances outside of our control, but rather on how we decide to act given the circumstances we face. Seneca did not choose exile in Corsica. But given that he was in Corsica, he turned his mind away from regret and despair and toward whatever he could do of value in his new abode. This is a lesson we all can profit from.

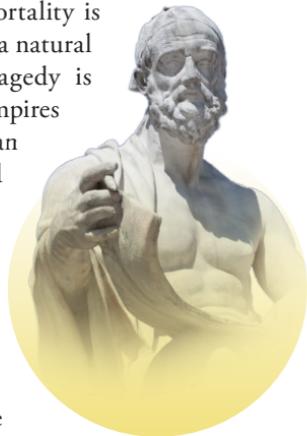
LETTER TO POLYBIUS

- Seneca wrote the third of his three letters of consolation to his friend Polybius,** who had recently lost an adult brother, around the year 43 or 44.

* Gaius Julius Polybius was the literary secretary of the emperor Claudius. He would be executed a few years later, allegedly for treason, but more likely because the empress Messalina got tired of him as a lover.

- Seneca's overture reminds Polybius that mortality is a fact of nature. He reminds us that to take a natural fact like death as a horrible personal tragedy is arrogant. We know how the world works. Empires and civilizations come and go, and every human being dies. Why, then, do we act so surprised when it happens to someone close to us?
- The reproach, however, immediately veers into consolation. We are not exceptions to the laws of nature but instead very much a part of nature. Rather than despairing at loss, we should rejoice at having been lucky enough to enjoy a lost one's presence while they were alive.
- Seneca then shifts toward some practical advice on how to overcome grief. Even today, we counsel people in grief to seek company and, when it is unavailable, to occupy their minds with something they find meaningful and restorative. If literature is not your cup of tea, perhaps music or painting will do. Or maybe traveling to new places, or volunteering for a cause. Seneca elegantly states that all the time spent on such things will be time safely and well spent.
- Another strategy Seneca presents is that instead of focusing on loss, we should nudge our minds toward the times we spent with our loved ones. Indulging the loss makes us feel bad, while focusing on our memories is a delight. We can choose which frame to nudge our mind toward, and that means there's nothing inevitable about grief or suffering.
- The letter concludes with a humane appeal to Polybius that flatly contradicts the stereotype of the unemotional Stoic. Seneca writes:

I know, indeed, that there are some men, whose wisdom is of a harsh rather than a brave character, who say that the wise man never would mourn. It seems to me that they never can have been in the position of mourners, for otherwise their misfortune would have shaken all their haughty philosophy out of them, and, however much against their will, would



have forced them to confess their sorrow. ... Let your tears flow, but let them some day cease to flow: groan as deeply as you will, but let your groans cease some day: regulate your conduct so that both philosophers and brothers may approve of it.

- At the end of this third letter, Seneca clearly and compellingly states that some degree of suffering is inevitable for humans and is not to be rebuked. But it is up to us, Seneca counsels, to decide to react to tragedy in a positive fashion, to focus on the good times and on the other people who love us.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What is Seneca's take on grief in his letters of consolation?

Answer on page 182



EPICTETUS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF REASON

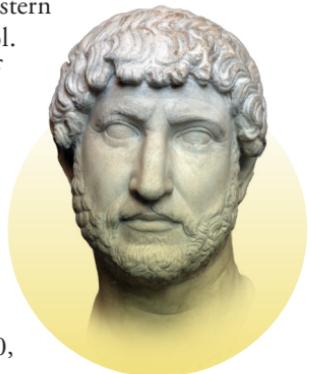
This lesson focuses on the first volume of the *Discourses*, a major treatise on Stoic philosophy written by one of Epictetus's most illustrious students, Arrian of Nicomedia. It is, in essence, a collection of dialogues and pronouncements by Epictetus, as Arrian recorded them. The writings provide us with a comprehensive overview of Epictetus's philosophical theory and practice.

EPICTETUS'S LIFE

- The 1st-century Stoic philosopher Epictetus lived an unusual life even by the standards of those turbulent times. He was a slave in Hierapolis* before he was bought by Epaphroditus, the personal secretary of the Roman emperor Nero, and brought to court in Rome. Eventually, Epictetus was made a freed man, and he studied under one of the most famous Stoic teachers: Musonius Rufus.
- When Epictetus himself first started teaching in the streets, it didn't go well. Someone who didn't take kindly to being taught philosophy by a former slave punched Epictetus in the face. Learning from this experience, Epictetus changed tactics and established his own school where students came to him, rather than the other way around.
- But his troubles were not over. The Stoics had a tendency to speak truth to power, and Roman emperors were easily annoyed by such an attitude. Several Stoic philosophers and Roman senators influenced by the Stoics were either killed or sent into exile for having opposed such emperors as Nero, Vespasian, and Domitian. Epictetus and his own teacher, Musonius, were both sent into exile on the orders of Domitian and Vespasian, respectively.

* in modern-day Pamukkale, Turkey

- Epictetus then moved to Nicopolis in northwestern Greece, where he reestablished his school. It became one of the most famous centers of philosophy in the ancient world. A later emperor, Hadrian, occasionally paid a visit, being on friendly terms with the by-now illustrious Stoic philosopher.
- From slave to freed man, and from exile to established teacher and friend of the emperor, Epictetus used Stoic practices to face a life of ups and downs. He died at about the age of 80, around the year 135.



MONEY AND REASON

- Near the beginning of the *Discourses*, Epictetus asks a question about money that he then attempts to answer: “What decides whether a sum of money is good? The money is not going to tell you; it must be the faculty that makes use of such impressions—reason.”
- Usually, we consider wealth to be a good thing, at least generally speaking. But for the Stoics, it was, at best, a preferred indifferent, meaning that it has value but doesn’t make a person better or worse, morally speaking. Instead, money and other so-called externals are valuable mostly because they are the sort of things that allow us to exercise virtue—that is, to improve our character.
- Money is not going to tell us how to use it. Reason does that. And without reason, virtue would be impossible. If you reason correctly, you will use your money wisely. If you reason incorrectly, you will use money unwisely. In the latter case, money ceases to become a preferred thing. It turns into what the Stoics called dispreferred, because it impairs our moral growth.
- So, Epictetus elaborates, asking and answering once more: “What should we do then? Make the best use of what is in our power, and treat the rest in accordance with its nature.”

- Indeed, reason tells us something far more important than how to use money. It allows us to grasp a fundamental truth about Stoic metaphysics: that a very limited number of things are under our complete control. Among those are our considered opinions and judgments, our endorsed values, and our decisions to act or not to act. Nothing else is in our power, including health, wealth, and reputation.
- That's why Epictetus teaches us to focus on what is in our power and take the rest with equanimity. Try your best to arrive at sound judgments, but be prepared when sometimes things don't go your way. The Stoic approach to life is to enjoy your successes and not be chagrined by your failures.

CHARACTER AND VIRTUE

- Death is serious business for Epictetus and the Stoics. In a sense, it's the ultimate test of our character. Consider the story of Helvidius Priscus, a 1st-century Roman senator who opposed the emperor Vespasian. He was banished from Rome and eventually killed on the emperor's order.
- Epictetus tells his students that Priscus's death was not in vain, stating another question and answer:

What good, you ask, did Priscus achieve, then, being just a single individual? And what does the purple achieve for the tunic? What else than standing out in it as purple, and setting a fine example for all the rest?

- Courageous individuals set the example for the rest of us. Even when they fail, they succeed in inspiring others to oppose tyranny and injustice. Not everyone might have the courage to give their life in defense of a just cause, but even so, Epictetus advises us: "Consider at what price you sell your integrity; but please, for God's sake, don't sell it cheap."
- Well, then, how might we work on our own character and become better human beings? Epictetus tells us how:

If from the moment you get up in the morning you adhere to your ideals, eating and bathing like a person of integrity, putting your principles into practice in every situation you face—the way a runner does when he applies the principles of running, or a singer those of musicianship—that is where you will see true progress embodied, and find someone who has not wasted their time making the journey here from home.

- Virtue is a skill, and, as any other skill, it can be learned by way of theoretical explanations and improved by way of practice. If you are a runner, your coach will explain how to run best, and you may get there by practicing. If you are a musician, your teacher will explain musical theory and application, and you'll learn to play your instrument with practice. The same applies to becoming better human beings. The philosopher provides us with a theoretical background, but it's up to us to improve day by day.

RESILIENCE AND PERSPECTIVE

- The Stoics are notorious for their emphasis on resilience and their belief in the uselessness of complaining about one's situation. It's sometimes said that the Stoic goes through life with a stiff upper lip. That is a stereotype that significantly distorts the Stoic philosophy. But resilience is a Stoic value, and so is putting things in perspective.
- As an example, Epictetus tells one of his students: "But my nose is running!" What do you have hands for, fool, if not to wipe it?" And that's practical advice.
- But then there's the philosophical question: "But how is it right that there be running noses in the first place?" Instead of thinking up protests, wouldn't it be easier just to wipe your nose?"
- Epictetus's example presents two distinct concepts of Stoic philosophy that are useful in everyday life. First, sometimes we complain about things that we can actually deal with on our own. Sometimes noses run. But guess what? You've got hands that can be used to wipe your nose.

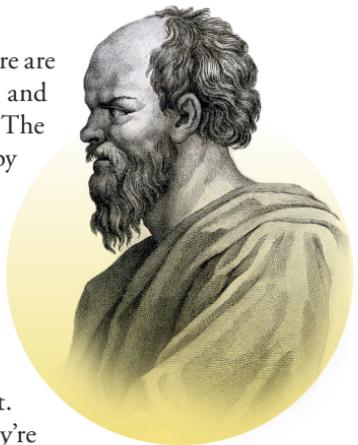
Second, we often complain about things that we can't do anything about, and that's just as pointless. There are running noses in the universe. And you have one right now. Since it's not in your power to alter the structure of the universe, why are you wasting your energy thinking, and complaining, about your running nose?

THE HUMAN COSMOPOLIS

- Another theme of Stoicism is cosmopolitanism: the notion that we are all members of the same cosmopolis, the city of the world. Epictetus advised his students: “Do as Socrates did, never replying to the question of where he was from with, ‘I am Athenian,’ or ‘I am from Corinth,’ but always, ‘I am a citizen of the world.’”
- This concept remains difficult for many of us to grasp or accept even two millennia later. Quite often, it’s natural for us to think that we are first and foremost citizens of a given nation, not the world. But, of course, there’s nothing natural about nation-states, which are a relatively recent cultural invention.
- In earlier times, people felt just as attached to their city-state, be it Athens or Corinth. Before that, we pledged allegiance to villages. And before that to nomadic bands.
- Why not accept the endpoint of this historical progression and embrace the reality that human beings are the same wherever we go, with the same hopes, desires, and fears? It’s in our own interest to behave as if the only planet we have is our collective home: the human cosmopolis.
- It takes time to develop an ability to reason properly and accept initially alien notions. For the ancient Greco-Romans, the project of becoming the best human being possible is a lifelong endeavor. It takes time, and a mindful effort, to flourish as moral agents who are capable of making difficult decisions—not just in our own interests but in the interests of the human cosmopolis.

JUSTICE AND COMPASSION

- And why should we do all this work when there are so many people who ignore the moral path and choose instead to take advantage of others? The Stoics have an interesting take, first outlined by Socrates, that nobody does evil on purpose, but only out of lack of wisdom.
- Someone who is about to do something wrong—say, a thief—knows that others will think it wrong. Still, they probably think there are good reasons to do what they are about to do, or they simply wouldn't do it. Maybe they've convinced themselves that they're somehow entitled to the things they're about to steal, perhaps because life has been unfair. Or maybe they have to feed their family and thievery is the only recourse left to them.
- Hence, Epictetus is compassionate. People who do bad things ought to be considered as suffering from a particular kind of blindness and be pitied and helped. This doesn't mean that Stoics condone thievery, or any crime. The crime ought to be stopped, if possible. But we also need to work toward reforming the wrongdoer and bringing him back into the human cosmopolis.
- Epictetus's charitable approach applies more broadly than to people committing crimes. It can also be put into practice when we disagree on such issues as politics or religion. If someone of a different religious persuasion thinks a specific action is welcome by God and you think otherwise, then let the other do what they think right, while you do your thing. It's the intention common to the two of you to please God that counts, not the specific way in which you do it.



Very few justice systems around the world adopt the Stoic perspective, forgoing retribution in favor of restorative and rehabilitative justice. But those systems are more humane, and they work.

THE FRAMING EFFECT

- Epictetus then uses an analogy to remind us of the best attitude to adopt whenever we suffer a setback:

The true person is revealed in difficult times. So when trouble comes, think of yourself as a wrestler whom Nature, like a trainer, has paired with a tough young buck. For what purpose? To turn you into Olympic-class material. But this is going to take some sweat to accomplish.

- Interestingly, what Epictetus does here is something that modern psychology recommends as a useful mental trick: the framing effect. This trick consists of willfully changing the way we frame events or situations in our minds. We tend to think there's a natural frame to understand things, but that's not the case. Instead, all frames are the result of how we decide to think about situations.
- For instance, suppose your boss calls to give you the news that you've been let go from your job. The automatic frame—the one that seems natural—is something along the lines of: "That's awful! What am I going to do now?"
- That's certainly one way to process the news. Another is: "Oh, interesting. This will force me to look for a new job, which is good because I kind of felt stuck here. But I didn't have the guts to just pick up and leave."
- Neither frame is more objectively true than the other. The only objective truth is that you've just been let go. How you think about this new development is up to you.

CONCLUSION

- Near the end of the first volume of *Discourses*, Epictetus reminds us what philosophy is all about. It is, he says, "an awareness of one's own mental fitness."

Philosophy is about reflecting on things, particularly on our values in life. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. That's a bit of an exaggeration, but the Stoic bet is that an examined life is one in which we will live better, more mindfully, more ethically, and more meaningfully.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Epictetus, *"Discourses," "Fragments," "Handbook."*

QUESTION

- ↗ What is the dichotomy of control, also known as the Stoic fork?

Answer on page 182



EPICETUS ON OVERCOMING FEAR

 f the eight volumes of the *Discourses*, only four survive. This lesson takes an in-depth look at the second volume to explore Epictetus's distinctive brand of Stoicism and consider how we might apply it to our own lives.

PAIN AND SUFFERING

- Epictetus knew what he was talking about when it came to pain and suffering—he had been a slave, and his master broke his leg by twisting it for fun. And yet he teaches that we are often scared more by the thought of suffering than by pain itself.
- The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius—a Stoic who was greatly influenced by Epictetus—developed a technique to cope with difficult situations. Whenever he faced something painful or hurtful, he reminded himself that the situation was not unique to him. Plenty of people throughout history have encountered similar experiences, and many have coped well. So, why couldn't he do the same?
- Striving to maintain a perspective on things is a technique endorsed by modern cognitive behavioral therapists. It helps with putting things in context and dealing with whatever setback we might experience.

INTEGRITY OF CHARACTER

- According to Stoic philosophy, nobody can ever force you to do what you don't want to do. You have absolute freedom over your own judgments and your decisions to act or not to act.

- You might be thinking: “What happens if my boss threatens to fire me unless I do what he says? How could I possibly say no?” The answer is of course you could say no! Yes, it would probably cost you your job. You simply have to make the choice between whether keeping your job is more important than refusing to do whatever your boss is asking. Whichever decision you make will be yours, and you’ll have to live with it.
- Here’s how Epictetus summarizes the situation: “Whenever externals are more important to you than your own integrity, then be prepared to serve them the remainder of your life.”
- You are truly free so long as you maintain the integrity of your character. If what you want is simply to be a good human being and to maintain your integrity, then you will be your own master for the rest of your life. That said, as soon as you give in, you will become the slave of whomever happens to have the power to grant you what you so desperately want.
- Indeed, for the Stoics, the integrity of your character is the most precious thing you have. Research in modern social psychology shows that a major factor affecting people’s happiness is whether they feel they are surrounded by people they can trust. Trust is a reciprocal thing: If you are untrustworthy, surely you cannot expect others to trust you, which in turn means that you cannot trust them. And your life will be miserable as a consequence.

MATERIAL REWARDS

- Most of us grow up thinking that what we should want are things like health, wealth, and fame. The Stoics, however, tend to think that material things are not that important in life. They’re nice if we have them but not worth sweating and worrying about. They are morally neutral.
- Epictetus also reminds us that obtaining material rewards is not under our control. Of course, we can strive to keep our bodies healthy, make money, or improve our reputations. But other people or circumstances might get in the way. Only our judgments, opinions, and decisions are under our complete control. And that’s why those are the only things that are truly good, or bad, for us.

- Epictetus says, “But the way I use them is good or bad, and depends on me.” In other words, possession of material things doesn’t make you a good person, and not possessing them doesn’t make you a bad person. To the contrary, it’s the other way around: You are the one making material things good or bad.
- Think about wealth, for instance. If you accumulate wealth by exploiting others, or use the wealth you control to corrupt, then you are using your wealth badly, or unvirtuously. But if you’ve acquired wealth honestly and use it to help others, then you are using wealth virtuously.
- But why should we act virtuously in the first place? Why not pursue pleasure and wealth instead?
- Epictetus reminds us that we are social animals, not solitary ones. Modern science confirms Stoic intuition: We evolved as highly social primates, and we thrive in a group. And the group thrives through cooperation and reciprocity, not rampant selfishness.

GOOD PRACTICE

- The faculty of reason is of central importance to Epictetus and the Stoics. Beyond our social nature, what distinguishes human beings from other animals is our capacity for reason. And for the Stoics, it’s a capacity that we ought to develop to the best of our abilities.
- Epictetus contrasts human beings with sheep and wild beasts. When we behave like sheep, Epictetus says, we go after our pleasures without thinking much about what we are doing, nor why. And when we behave like wild beasts, we become angry, aggressive, and violent. In either case, we forgo reason—the most human of all our attributes—and, as a consequence, we betray human nature.
- We can avoid betraying our rational nature through mindful practice. In everything we do, good practice allows us to improve. Bad practice—or simply no practice—causes us to slide backward. Whether we talk about writing, playing an instrument, or working on character, the principle is the same. By being mindful, you will steer your character toward honesty. Fail to pay attention, and chances are you will become dishonest before you realize it.

- This is why philosophers tell us to practice and train, not just study theory. If you simply read philosophy books or quote famous philosophers, you're not really doing anything of consequence. But the theory becomes relevant if you find ways to translate it into practice. Don't simply tell yourself that you should be honest and trustworthy; *be* honest and trustworthy, especially if it costs you.
- More broadly, philosophical theory and practice go hand in hand, so it's not a good idea to engage one without the other. Practice without theory is blind, and, without guidance, you'll have to make up your mind about what to do on the fly. At the same time, theory without practice quickly slides into navel gazing or into a parlor game with no real consequences.

ROLE ETHICS

- Epictetus is famous for his role ethics, a practical approach to living a moral life. He says:

Never get into family fights over material things; give them up willingly, and your moral standing will increase in proportion. ... Reflect on the other social roles you play. If you are a council member, consider what a council member should do. If you are young, what does being young mean, if you are old, what does age imply, if you are a father, what does fatherhood entail? Each of our titles, when reflected upon, suggests the acts appropriate to it.

- The first bit of advice concerns the trade-off between family relations and material things. It's distressingly common to hear about people fighting with relatives, or even cutting them off entirely, because of material things like an inheritance. In Stoicism, material things are far less important than virtue and character. And the most obvious arena in which we can practice virtue is as family members, whether we are fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, or sisters.

The hallmark of a good and thoughtful person is that they are able to juggle their many roles with integrity and compassion.

- Each of these roles contributes to the fabric of life. Few people get to their deathbed with regrets about a slightly smaller inheritance, or that they haven't amassed enough wealth, or that they have not become sufficiently famous. On the contrary, one of the most frequent regrets of people facing the final curtain is not having had good relations with others, especially with family and friends.
- When Epictetus says we should pay attention to our societal roles because they immediately suggest the proper actions, he doesn't mean there is only one way to be a father, daughter, friend, or council person. However, he is saying that each of these roles comes with certain expectations and duties, and a moment's reflection will show us what such expectations and duties are.

ANXIETY

- One final bit of advice from the second volume of Epictetus's *Discourses* is about anxiety. Anxiety, from a Stoic perspective, is an irrational emotive state caused by the misjudgment of a particular situation. Epictetus says:

Take a lyre player: he's relaxed when he performs alone, but put him in front of an audience, and it's a different story, no matter how beautiful his voice or how well he plays the instrument. Why? Because he not only wants to perform well, he wants to be well received—and the latter lies outside his control.*

- When the lyre player becomes anxious in front of an audience, it's because he's shifted his goals in the wrong direction. Instead of pursuing the internal goal of playing to the best of his abilities, he's now pursuing the external goal of pleasing the audience. But it's the former goal, not the latter, that is under his control. Even the best performer can disappoint an audience.

* Professional musicians train themselves to ignore the public from the stage because we tend to perform best when we're doing so for ourselves.

- In the same passage, Epictetus describes a famous meeting between the king of Macedonia, Antigonus II Gonatas, and Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism:

It was Antigonus who was anxious before their meeting. Naturally—he wanted to make a good impression, which was beyond his control. Zeno, for his part, had no wish to please the king; no expert needs validation from an amateur.

- Here, we have a powerful king who is anxious to meet a famous philosopher, while the philosopher himself remains exceedingly calm. The reason for the king's anxiety is that he has not yet learned the philosopher's wisdom. And the essence of that wisdom is that making a good impression is not something under your control. Only behaving at your best is. Remember this the next time you wish to impress someone.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Epictetus, *"Discourses," "Fragments," "Handbook."*

QUESTION

- What is Epictetus's take on the consequences of unethical actions?

Answer on page 182



EPICTETUS ON DESIRE, ACTION, AND JUDGMENT

Epictetus employed the three disciplines of desire, action, and assent as a framework through which to lead a more meaningful life. The goal is to redirect our priorities, to guide us in how to act toward others, and to refine our ability to arrive at correct judgments. Together, the three disciplines train us to live like Stoics.

DESIRE

- The Stoics believed that a great deal of our fears, anxieties, and general stress in life comes from having the wrong priorities. We think we ought to make money, become famous, and keep ourselves healthy forever. The problem is that none of this ultimately is under our control.
- What, then, is under our control? First, our considered judgment, or the sort of judgment about things and people that we arrive at after reflection; second, our explicitly endorsed (as opposed to subconscious) values; and third, our deliberate decisions to act or not to act. Nothing else.
- The distinction between things that are and are not up to us is called the dichotomy of control, and it plays a central role in Epictetus's vision of Stoicism. The discipline of desire aims to internalize the dichotomy of control and to reorient our desires away from external things that we do not control. Instead, it directs our attention toward the internal things that we do control.
- If we succeed at applying the discipline of desire, the reward is a lofty one: a life without anxiety or stress, where we are secure in the knowledge that we have done all we could, and an understanding that sometimes we win and sometimes we lose—and that's OK.

ACTION

- Once we've set our priorities straight and we've retrained ourselves to desire what we ought to, as opposed to what other people tell us we should, we can turn our attention to the second discipline: action.
- We live in a world populated by others who depend on us, and who we depend on in turn. It's important to reflect on how we should interact with them.
- The Stoic take is that we should treat other people the way we would like to be treated ourselves: with fairness. Here, we need to remember that even when people make mistakes, they are still capable of reason and learning, and they are fellow human beings.
- Compassion, rather than criticism or berating, is the preferable approach. Besides, aren't we fallible ourselves? Do we never make mistakes? And when we do, don't we prefer when people are forgiving and helpful rather than critical and dismissive?
- The discipline of action empowers us to be as understanding of others as we wish them to be of us.

ASSENT

- The third discipline, assent, is the most difficult one to master according to Epictetus. *Assent* here refers to how we refine and decide upon first impressions after we've had a chance to reflect on them. Stoic assent is not passive acceptance but rather the analytical outcome of those first impressions.
- Epictetus believed that we should not act on our impressions without evaluating them first, nor without proper training, because we're likely to make mistakes. We should pause and analyze our impressions.
- That's what the discipline of assent does: It trains us to think more carefully and more deliberately about what we are about to do. The objective is to make fewer incorrect judgments, and therefore fewer mistakes in life.

- We should never give assent to first impressions without deliberation. But in life, we don't always have time to stop and think about things. That's why Epictetus says we should have the correct judgment ready at hand, no matter what the situation.
- We can do this by means of a simple but effective Stoic technique that Epictetus briefly describes at the end of a passage on evening meditation. He says do not let your "tender eyelids" go to sleep before you've examined the day, thinking carefully about what things you did well and what you might have failed to do well.
- The point is not to indulge in regret, since the past is outside of your control. You can't change the past, but you can learn from it, making a mental note of which actions you took that worked out well and which actions didn't. Learning from experiences—both positive and negative—is a crucial element of wisdom.

ENDURANCE

- Stoicism, in part, is about endurance, but not for its own sake. Stoics don't go about life with a stiff upper lip. Rather, they strive to respond appropriately to whatever situation they find themselves in. This is how Epictetus puts it:

Here is the test of the matter, this is how the philosopher* is proved. For fever too is a part of life, like walking, sailing, traveling. Do you read when you are walking? No. Nor do you in a fever: but if you walk aright, you have done your part as a walker; if you bear your fever aright, you have done your part as a sick man.

- Our virtue as human beings can be tested even in relatively minor matters. If you have a fever, behave appropriately. This includes not only staying in bed instead of doing something else but also being kind to others, particularly your caretakers, on the grounds that they are there to help you, and being sick doesn't give you a license to be nasty.

* *Philosopher* here refers to anyone who strives to live their life philosophically—that is, in the best possible way.

- Stoics also train themselves to bear other people's ill manners, including one's own relatives. One of Epictetus's students complains, "My brother ought not to have behaved so to me." Epictetus replies, "No, but it is his business to look to that; however he may behave, I will deal with him as I ought."
- This is a profound insight into the ethics of interacting with others, and Epictetus is clearly applying the dichotomy of control. What your brother does is not up to you, but how you respond most certainly is. So, if someone has misbehaved toward you, that's unfortunate, but it's a stain on their character, not yours. If you retaliate, however, you add a stain to your own character.



CHARACTER

- One recurring theme of Stoicism is that the value of a person is found exclusively in their character. Epictetus goes further, arguing that there's no point in comparing yourself to others, unless it is to learn from them. Our concern should be to become the best human beings we can be and accept that doing so is up to us alone. Moreover, we are not helped—and, indeed, could be hampered—by externals such as wealth and fame. They could go to our head and get in the way of our progress.
- But what if less scrupulous people are doing better than we are in life? Again, it's all about priorities. Would you prefer to get to the end of your life with a lot of money but no friends or relatives who care for you? Or would you rather have less money and more self-respect? For the Stoics, the answer is clear.
- Along similar lines, Epictetus adds: "'Being healthy is good, being sick is bad.' No, my friend: enjoying health in the right way is good; making bad use of your health is bad."

- We take it for granted that health is an unqualified good. But a moment's reflection will show that you wouldn't wish good health to a tyrant, because he will simply have more time to impose suffering on others. So, health is not, after all, an unqualified good. It depends on the circumstances.
- Of course, you don't really have control over how the tyrant uses his health. But you do control what you do with yours. And this applies to sickness as well. Other things being equal, sickness is what the Stoics call a dispreferred indifferent, meaning it has negative value but does not affect your moral character. Even then, it's still up to each of us individually to behave virtuously, by bearing our illness with grace and being kind to those around us.
- The Stoics even welcome hardship because it provides them with an opportunity to test themselves and improve as human beings. This might sound paradoxical, but Epictetus says: "I have a bad neighbor—bad, that is, for himself. For me, though, he is good: he exercises my powers of fairness and sociability."
- Suppose you face an unexpected setback, whether minor or major. For instance, your flight has been cancelled and you're stuck at the airport. One option is to respond with frustration or anger. Of course, this behavior changes nothing except to make yourself even more miserable.
- By contrast, you could decide to deliberately look at the situation in a different way.*^{*} For instance, you could look at what is happening as a challenge to test your virtue. You could keep notes on how you react, scoring yourself at the end of the challenge.

Epictetus developed his Stoic philosophy at a time when he opposed the Roman emperor Domitian, whom he regarded as a tyrant.

^{*} Modern psychologists call this the framing effect.

MORTALITY

- Arguably the most difficult problem any human being faces is the mortality of loved ones. In expressing his tender but tough elegy to the mortality of humankind, Epictetus deploys a beautiful analogy drawn from the vineyard. Reflecting on life and death, he told his students:

You must remind yourself that you love a mortal, and that nothing that you love is your very own; it is given you for the moment, not for ever nor inseparably, but like a fig or a bunch of grapes at the appointed season of the year, and if you long for it in winter you are a fool. So too if you long for your son or your friend, when it is not given you to have him, know that you are longing for a fig in winter time.

- Nobody likes to lose friends, relatives, or partners. It's the most painful human experience we must endure, particularly when the loss is unexpected. But we should also remind ourselves that death itself is not unexpected. It's a natural phenomenon that can arrive at any moment, for any reason.
- But this should not be a source of despair. On the contrary, taking our mortality seriously is reason to be mindful of our loved ones. It's also a cue to be mindful of how lucky we are to have such people in our lives and motivation to enjoy every minute we spend with them, precisely because we know that our time with them won't last forever.

REWARDS FOR VIRTUE

- As for his lesson on character and virtue, Epictetus asks rhetorically: "Is there no further reward?" And as often is the case, he answers his own question, replying:

Do you look for any greater reward for a good man than to do what is noble and right? At Olympia you do not want anything else; you are content to have been crowned at Olympia. Does it seem to you so small and worthless a thing to be noble and good and happy?

- The parallel, of course, is to the original Olympic Games, where victory did not come with lucrative sponsorships from international brands but instead with a simple wreath of olive leaves.
- Even today, in our somewhat cynical age, it comes across as more than a bit strange for someone to ask: What's in it for me if I am good? Goodness, or virtue, is its own reward.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Epictetus, “*Discourses*,” *Fragments*, “*Handbook*.”

QUESTION

- ↗ According to Epictetus, how should we behave when we are sick and in pain?

Answer on page 182



EPICETUS ON HOW TO BE FREE

This lesson discusses the fourth and last surviving volume of Epictetus's *Discourses*. In it, Epictetus teaches different ways that Stoics can be free.

EVIL

- Epictetus asks his students, "Who wants to live with delusion and prejudice, being unjust, undisciplined, mean and ungrateful?" Before they can reply, he answers: "No one. No bad person, then, lives the way he wants, and no bad man is free."
- This statement encapsulates the fundamental Stoic tenet that no one does evil on purpose. Even the worst person might be shocked at being described as evil. They likely believe that they have good reason for their actions, even if the rest of us believe they are mistaken.
- If no bad person is free, does that mean bad people are slaves to misguided goals? Perhaps they want to become famous, or rich, or powerful. If so, they might labor under the mistaken impression that such material rewards are the true importance in life.
- The Stoics believed that what truly matters is acting with integrity, having friends, and being loved. Viewed this way, bad people—as a result of their misguided priorities—are not free but instead are in the power of whomever happens to be able to grant them what they want. The Stoics believed they had to be the masters of their own desires in order to be truly free.

HAPPINESS

- The Stoic bet for happiness and freedom is that we should want only those things that lie within our power to begin with: our good judgments, our decisions to act or not to act, our integrity of character, and our honesty.
- To the Stoic, the life worth living is one in which we cultivate ourselves in order to become the best human beings we can be. The rest we take with equanimity, knowing that fortune sometimes will favor us and at other times will turn away from us.
- Epictetus deploys humor to reinforce the point, stating that our true freedom lies not in what we can do but in what we can will:

“But suppose I choose to walk, and someone obstructs me?”
What part of you will they obstruct? Certainly not your power of assent? “No, my body.” Your body, yes—as they might obstruct a rock. “Perhaps; but the upshot is, now I’m not allowed to walk.” Whoever told you, “Walking is your irrevocable privilege”? I said only that the will to walk could not be obstructed.

- To the modern ear, the notion that our will remains free even if our body is blocked might sound far too restrictive a concept of freedom. We want freedom of movement, of travel, and of the pursuit of happiness. Those are all nice to have, no doubt. But Epictetus’s point is that they are not under our control. They depend, in part, on the will of others.
- We should always remember that those additional freedoms may be taken away from us through the vagaries of fate. And we are always dependent on someone else in order to exercise such freedoms, which means that in pursuing them, we are not truly free.
- Moreover, certain things we think so essential for our happiness—money and fame, for example—often do not make us happy at all. The crux of the matter, Epictetus says, is that “freedom is not achieved by satisfying desire, but by eliminating it.”

- In modern language, we can rephrase the concept this way: Freedom and happiness come from the inside, not the outside. And so long as we persist in thinking otherwise, we condemn ourselves to slavery and unhappiness.

JUDGMENT

- It follows from the Stoic approach that the true value of a person lies in their character, not in whatever externals they may possess. So, we need to internalize the notion that it is not a good idea to judge things and people from their appearances. Epictetus says:

Is everything judged by its outward form alone? On that principle you must call your waxen apple an apple. No, it must smell and taste like an apple: the outward semblance is not enough. So, when you judge people, nose and eyes are not sufficient, you must see if they have the judgements of people.

- “The judgments of people” refers to the Stoics’ belief in humans’ ability to reason and arrive at sound judgments. The measure of a person lies in what judgments they arrive at when it comes to decide how they conduct their lives.
- But we live in a society that often does the opposite of what Epictetus counsels. We judge people by their external attributes: whether they’re well dressed, whether they have money, whether they’re famous. So, if we decide to go against the tide and follow Epictetus’s advice, we’re likely to swim against powerful societal currents, with potentially troublesome consequences.
- One of Epictetus’s students raises precisely this point. He asks, “What then? Do you want me to be despised?” Epictetus responds:

By whom? By those who know? Nay, how will those who know despise one who is gentle and self-respecting? By those who do not know? What do you care for them? No craftsman cares for those who have no skill!

■ Philosophy, for Epictetus, is the art of living. There are people who know how to do it, or who at least are learning, and others who don't know and don't care. Those who practice philosophy as a way of life are the only ones whose comments you should be concerned with, because they know what they're talking about.

■ This line of reasoning is why Epictetus can say:

I am poor, but I hold a right judgement on poverty: what do I care then, whether they pity me for poverty? I am not in office and others are; but I hold the right opinion as to being in office and out of it. Those who pity me shall take their own views: I have neither hunger nor thirst nor cold, but their own hunger or thirst makes them imagine the same of me.

Imagine learning how to play a musical instrument. It would be wise to listen to the feedback of people who already know how to play or those who are learning with you. But why would you be preoccupied by the comments of someone who knows nothing about music?

■ Here is yet another sense in which Stoic practitioners are free. They are free of other people's prejudices because they've consciously adopted a different set of values from those prevalent in society.

FACTS

■ The Stoics' approach to solving a problem is often to put the problem into broader perspective. Epictetus relates this dialogue: "But now the time is come to die," says one of his students. Epictetus responds: "What do you mean by 'die'? Do not use fine words, but state the facts as they are."

■ Death is arguably our ultimate challenge. Epictetus's predecessor, Seneca, called death the most important test of our character. But the term *death* often invokes dubious metaphysical notions, such as the possibility of an afterlife.

- Epictetus then corrects his student, saying that what others call “dying” is in actuality a specific type of physical transformation—one that he describes in terms that are not that far from the modern scientific understanding.
- Of course, death has meaning for us as human beings beyond the physical decline of an organism. But Epictetus’s point is that we should keep an objective description of facts separate from our value judgments, as those judgments are not inherent in the facts, as much as it may appear so to untrained minds.
- Facts are facts—they don’t come prelabeled with meanings. So, it’s useful to describe facts in the most precise way possible. That helps us formulate reasonable judgments about them.
- If you think of death as a terrible thing, maybe followed by an afterlife where you might or might not thrive, then the whole experience becomes terrifying. But if you think of death as a natural process by which your body merges with the rest of the cosmos, you might find peace of mind.

REASON

- The proper subject matter of a philosopher—meaning anyone who is interested in living a worthy life—is reason. Stoic philosophy holds that if we study reason, we will discover that a beneficial human life is one that employs our ability to think in order to improve society.
- The problem, Epictetus says, is that people tend to be dismissive of philosophy, thus missing their chance to pursue the good life. He presents this dismissal of philosophy as a logical fallacy, stating the following analogy:

If one hears a man singing badly, one does not say, “See how badly musicians sing,” but rather, “This man is no musician.”

It is only in regard to philosophy that men behave so: when they see any one acting contrary to the philosopher’s profession, instead of refusing him the name, they assume that he is a philosopher, and then finding from the facts that he is misbehaving, they infer that there is no use in being a philosopher.

- An even better analogy is wrestling. Epictetus and the Stoic philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius both made reference to the following example: “Get up,” says the trainer, ‘and wrestle again, until you are made strong.’”
- Life keeps sending challenges our way. And yet those very challenges are what make us stronger and better-equipped to face the next challenge.
- What is all this training and effort for? One of Epictetus’s students asks the same question, and Epictetus replies:

What greater good do you look for than this? You were shameless and shall be self-respecting, you were undisciplined and shall be disciplined, untrustworthy and you shall be trusted, dissolute and you shall be self-controlled. If you look for greater things than these, go on doing as you do now: not even a god can save you.

- We should not aspire to anything more than to be self-respecting, disciplined, trustworthy, and self-controlled. The good news, of course, is that all of that is entirely under our control. If we decide to move in that direction, we’re free. Nobody can force us to do otherwise.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Epictetus, “*Discourses*,” *Fragments*, “*Handbook*.”

QUESTION

- ↗ Epictetus says that the only true evil is ignorance.
What does that mean?

Answer on page 182



A MANUAL FOR THE GOOD LIFE: *THE ENCHIRIDION*

Epictetus's *Manual*, known also as *The Enchiridion*, was compiled by Arrian of Nicomedia. It does include material from the *Discourses*, but the selections chosen by Arrian have a practical bent and entirely bypass the philosophical explanations that Epictetus offers to his students in the *Discourses*. Instead, *The Enchiridion* is a practical manual to live what the Greco-Romans called a eudaimonic life—a life worth living.

ACCEPTANCE

- *The Enchiridion* begins in this way:

Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing.

- The only things truly within our power are our judgments (what Epictetus calls opinions), our decisions to act (or motivations), and what we consciously pursue or avoid (desire and aversion). These three categories correspond to Epictetus's three disciplines: assent, action, and desire.
- Nothing else is really under our control, Epictetus tells us. That includes all so-called externals, such as our bodies, our possessions, our reputation, and our jobs.

- Of course, our opinions, judgments, and decisions certainly are influenced by others, but in the end, you make up your own mind. And you have to live with the consequences.
- Similarly, while we influence the health of our bodies, it is not ultimately under our control. Sure, you can adopt a healthy diet, go to the gym, and get periodically checked by your doctor. But all it takes is a tiny little virus and you'll be out of commission. Or maybe you'll get hit by a car while crossing the street.
- Neither the virus nor the driver is under your control. This matters, according to Epictetus, because

If you have the right idea about what really belongs to you and what does not, you will never be subject to force or hindrance, you will never blame or criticize anyone, and everything you do will be done willingly.

- He's saying that if we internalize the dichotomy of control—that is, the distinction between what is and is not up to us—we will live a serene life, focusing our efforts on what is up to us and taking the rest with equanimity. Acceptance is a highly effective recipe for peace of mind.

HARMONY WITH NATURE

- In the section teaching us how to change our desires and aversions, Epictetus says:

When you're about to embark on any action, remind yourself what kind of action it is. If you're going out to take a bath, set before your mind the things that happen at the baths, that people splash you, that people knock up against you, that people steal from you. And you'll thus undertake the action in a surer manner if you say to yourself at the outset, "I want to take a bath and ensure at the same time that my choice remains in harmony with nature."

Adam Smith,
Benjamin Franklin,
John Harvard, and
Thomas Jefferson
all owned copies
of Epictetus's
Manual in their
private libraries.

- This is a general rule of conduct derived directly from the dichotomy of control. Whatever we set out to do, Epictetus says, we should seek both to accomplish our goal and remain in harmony with nature. This is a poetic way to say that we should act reasonably and pro-socially.
- Not many people go to the public baths these days, but a lot of us go to the movies. You've probably experienced someone in front of you whipping out their phone and texting during the middle of the movie, apparently oblivious to the fact that the lit screen interferes with other people's enjoyment of the show.
- You could yell at them, or grab their phone and smash it, but that would not be pro-social behavior. So, just like Epictetus says, every time you head to the movie theater, keep the possibility in mind that you might not be able to enjoy the experience. Remind yourself that it's up to you to remain in harmony with nature.
- This doesn't mean that Stoics are pushovers. It's neither unreasonable nor unsocial to politely ask the offender to turn off their phone, or even complain to the theater management.

RESILIENCE AND VIRTUE

- Epictetus reminds us that we should turn every occasion for distress into an exercise of resilience and virtue. He writes:

Provoked by the sight of a handsome man or a beautiful woman, you will discover within you the contrary power of self-restraint. Faced with pain, you will discover the power of endurance. If you are insulted, you will discover patience. In time, you will grow to be confident that there is not a single impression that you will not have the moral means to tolerate.

- This makes Stoicism sound like a pretty demanding philosophy of life. And it is. Then again, it's not easy to be a good Christian, or Buddhist, or a good person in general.
- Then again, is Epictetus's advice really so harsh? At one point, he uses an interesting metaphor, stating:

- Remember to act always as if you were at a symposium. When the food or drink comes around, reach out and take some politely; if it passes you by don't try pulling it back. And if it has not reached you yet, don't let your desire run ahead of you, be patient until your turn comes.
- This implies that it's OK to take advantage of the good things in life, so long as we do so virtuously: by taking seriously and respecting the fact that we are members of a society, where others have the same wants, needs, and rights as we do.

ACTION AND JUSTICE

- *The Enchiridion* now turns to Epictetus's discipline of action, concerned with how to behave in the world, both toward ourselves and other people.
- In response to the complaint "My brother is unfair to me," Epictetus states:
- Well then, keep up your side of the relationship; don't concern yourself with his behavior, only with what you must do to keep your will in tune with nature. Another person will not hurt you without your cooperation; you are hurt the moment you believe yourself to be.
- Whether or not an offense has been committed, it's your choice whether to focus on the alleged injustice—thus making it difficult for you to maintain a positive relationship with the person—or on other aspects of the situation—for instance, the fact that you grew up together and share many memories. The second strategy is far more conducive to a lasting relationship than is focusing on trouble.
- Of course, the obvious objection developing here is that Stoicism may begin to sound like a quietist philosophy that risks turning us into a bunch of doormats that other people can walk over. But this is far from the case. We always have the option of acting to stop an injustice.
- Indeed, one of the four cardinal virtues of Stoicism is justice—the belief in treating ourselves and others with fairness and respect. So, it's up to us, and our best judgment, to decide whether to focus on the injustice or be forgiving. The Stoic default is the latter—forgiveness—but that doesn't preclude action.

- And still, we all too easily rush to criticize others or to feel offended and injured. How about changing that default to the Stoic one? Understand and forgive first. Then let's talk about what needs to be done to make things right.

The Greek term *encheridion* means "a little thing in the hand." It often referred to a dagger or other small weapon, but it could also be applied to a book of precepts and sayings to keep with oneself for easy consultation.

LOGIC IN THE DISCIPLINE OF ASSENT

- We now enter the sections of *The Enchiridion* dealing with the discipline of assent, where we use our reasoning skills to arrive at better judgments. What Epictetus says here is particularly insightful:

Whenever anyone criticizes or wrongs you, remember that they are only doing or saying what they think is right. They cannot be guided by your views, only their own; so if their views are wrong, they are the ones who suffer insofar as they are misguided.

I mean, if someone declares a true conjunctive proposition to be false, the proposition is unaffected, it is they who come off worse for having their ignorance exposed.

- In logic, a conjunctive is a situation where A and C is true only if A is true and C is true. So, for instance, the proposition "Massimo likes figs and grapes" is true if and only if both A ("Massimo likes figs") and C ("Massimo likes grapes") are true. If instead either one is false, then the conjunctive is false.
- What Epictetus is saying is that when people criticize you for the wrong reasons, they're making a mistake in reasoning. It's analogous to declaring a true conjunctive to be false. So, the problem isn't with the conjunctive, or with you, but rather with those who make the mistake. Analogously, sometimes people will criticize you for the right reason, in which case you should pay attention and learn rather than get mad.

- Here is another lesson in applying logic to the discipline of assent: “The following are non-sequiturs: ‘I am richer, therefore superior to you’; or ‘I am a better speaker, therefore a better person than you.’”
- So many make the mistake Epictetus is highlighting: to think that because someone is rich, or speaks well, or is famous, that person is also a decent human being. They might or might not be. External attributes such as fame and wealth are logically independent from goodness of character.
- External circumstances do not guarantee anything about an individual’s character, and therefore it is an error of judgment to take them as indicators of character.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE

- Most of the last sections of *The Enchiridion* are devoted to how to live a philosophical life. This doesn’t mean the life of an academic philosopher, but instead a life worth living, informed by one’s reflection on what is important and why.
- In fact, Epictetus warns us about being too academic. He says:

If I admire the interpretation [of a philosophical treatise],
I have turned into a literary critic instead of a philosopher,
the only difference being that, instead of Homer, I’m
interpreting Chrysippus.

- Epictetus is telling us that we shouldn’t study Chrysippus* in order to learn logic for its own sake. Instead, we should study logic in order to learn how to reason well, and therefore how to navigate our lives better. Otherwise, we risk becoming a literary critic who reads Homer not for his beautiful poetry and insights into human nature but to dissect the literature to the point of stripping it of meaning.
- So, when is a good time to finally start living like a philosopher? Epictetus tells us in no uncertain terms:

* The third head of the Stoic school and one of the foremost logicians in antiquity

When faced with anything painful or pleasurable, anything bringing glory or disrepute, realize that the crisis is now, that the Olympics have started, and waiting is no longer an option; that the chance for progress, to keep or lose, turns on the events of a single day.

- Epictetus, by drawing an analogy here between life and the Olympics, is saying that the race has already started; it's no longer time to practice but rather to run. Enough talking about how to be a good person, Marcus Aurelius will say a few decades later in his *Meditations*. Just be one already!

CONCLUSION

- *The Enchiridion* ends with a handful of quotes that Arrian thought were particularly inspiring. One is “Anytus and Meletus can kill me, but they cannot harm me.”**
- These words were spoken by Socrates at his trial on charges of impiety and corruption of the youth of Athens. He is referring to two of the people who brought the charges that would lead to his condemnation and execution.
- The quote encapsulates a fundamental Stoic tenet: Others might be able to harm us physically, but they can never harm our character and integrity unless we allow them to. These are words that have inspired people to brave difficult circumstances for over two millennia.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Epictetus, “*Discourses*,” *Fragments*, “*Handbook*.”

QUESTION

- ↗ Epictetus says that whenever we set out to do something, we should actually keep two goals, not one, in mind. What are those?

Answer on page 183

** Socrates’s words are reported by Plato in his dialogue known as the *Apology*.

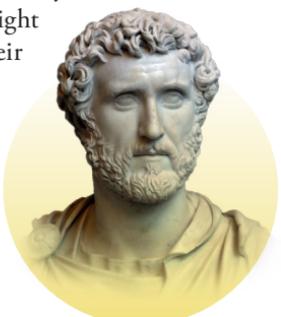


MARCUS AURELIUS ON BEING THANKFUL

The 2nd-century Roman emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote one of the classical texts of antiquity, the *Meditations*, in the form of a private philosophical diary that probably was never meant for publication. While Marcus emphasizes a series of practical mental exercises to help him cope with daily life, the text also features quite a bit of original philosophical analysis. This lesson examines the first four chapters, or books, of his *Meditations*.

MARCUS'S REIGN

- Marcus Aurelius was born on April 26 in the year 121 and died one month short of 59 years later. His reign was the last of the so-called Five Good Emperors—a period of stability and prosperity for the Romans. One thing these emperors had in common is that they chose successors who were capable in their own right rather than simply handing power over to their children.*
- Marcus was long groomed for the imperial role. He was adopted by his predecessor, Antoninus Pius, at the behest of the emperor before them, Hadrian. He was schooled by a number of tutors, some of them Stoic philosophers, and he adopted the life of a philosopher at age 11.



* This was not by choice, as four of the Five Good Emperors did not have natural children. The exception was Marcus, whose son Commodus became emperor and was eventually assassinated and declared a public enemy by the Senate.



Antonine plague in Rome, circa 165-180

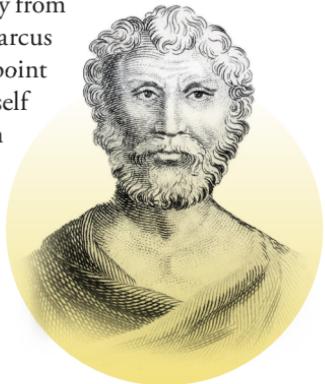
- Marcus Aurelius's mastery of Stoic philosophy helped him to navigate a series of difficult situations during his reign, including two frontier wars, a rebellion by one of his generals, and a plague—probably smallpox—that killed millions throughout the Roman Empire.

GRATITUDE

- Chapter one of the *Meditations* is a long exercise in gratitude toward some of the people who influenced Marcus. At the top of the list are Marcus's mother and grandfather. He writes:

From my grandfather Verus I learned good morals and the government of my temper. ... From my mother [I learned] abstinence, not only from evil deeds, but even from evil thoughts; and further, simplicity in my way of living, far removed from the habits of the rich.

- Marcus is grateful for having learned morality and self-control. Apparently, he suffered from a bit of temper, but he recognized it as particularly dangerous defect given the amount of power he wielded.
- The mention of simple living and staying away from the habits of the rich is also important. Marcus was uncomfortable with court life, to the point that later on in the *Meditations*, he tells himself that a Stoic can live well anywhere, even in an imperial palace. Unlike several emperors before and after him, Marcus was not ostentatious.**
- Marcus then thanks the Stoic philosopher Junius Rusticus, from whom he says he has learned to be easily “pacified and reconciled” with respect to “those who have offended me by words, or done me wrong.”
- One recurring notion in Stoicism is that the wise person does not take offense. If someone says something negative about you, regardless of their intentions, it must fall into one of two categories: either the person is factually correct, or he is not. For the Stoic, a falsehood told about you by someone else is just air moving in your vicinity. It has no causal power to offend you, unless you let it.
- One more person Marcus expresses gratitude for is Sextus of Chaeronea, a philosopher and the nephew or grandson of Plutarch. Marcus says, “From Sextus [I learned] to tolerate ignorant persons, and those who form opinions without consideration.”
- Sextus’s view is that many people form opinions without much thought, so they’re the ones who should be embarrassed. Of course, the tolerance of an emperor with the power of life and death over others is admirable, and imagine how much better the world would be if we all practiced such restraint.



** Marcus used his own money to help Roman causes, as when he sold imperial property to help counter the devastating effects of the Antonine plague that struck Rome in the years 165 to 180.

MEDITATION ON ADVERSITY

- The second book of the *Meditations* opens with a statement that provides the basis for a common Stoic exercise known as the *premeditatio malorum*, or meditation on adversity. It goes like this:

Begin the morning by saying to yourself, I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. ... I can neither be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him.

- First, Marcus reminds himself that we will likely encounter disagreeable people who wish to take advantage of us, are ungrateful for something we did for them, or are arrogant, envious, or unsocial. Since this is a factual aspect of human existence, we should not be caught off guard but rather accept it as part of the standard furnishing of our lives.
- The idea for this exercise is to take a few minutes ahead of time to reflect on the possibility of unpleasant situations and people we are likely to encounter and prepare our minds to deal with them to the best of our ability.
- To the Stoics, only things that undermine our character are evil, and only things that improve it are good. It's up to us whether to engage in vicious behavior, which is bad for our character, or in virtuous behavior, which is good for our character. Envious, ungrateful, and deceitful people are simply unaware of what is good for them. Consequently, we should pity them rather than be angry with them.
- Marcus also tells himself that he cannot be touched by unvirtuous behavior because he is in charge of his own behavior. Moreover, he wishes to keep in mind at all times that others, whether misguided or not, are his brothers and sisters. They are members of the great ideal human city, the cosmopolis, and deserve our respect and compassion as fellow human beings.

SELF-REFLECTION

- In the second book of the *Meditations*, Marcus writes:

Failure to observe what is in the mind of another has seldom made a man unhappy; but those who do not observe the movements of their own minds must of necessity be unhappy.
- For many of us, it comes naturally to pay attention to what other people think while spending little or no time in self-reflection. But Marcus points out that preoccupation with the opinions of others seldom brings us happiness, while lack of attention to our own thoughts is guaranteed to get in the way of our goals.
- Marcus also tells us that we ought to live our lives with a sense of urgency, saying, “Since it is possible that you might depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly.”
- We don’t know when we’ll die, and we tend to think it will happen later rather than sooner. But expectations about our longevity based on mortality tables are mere statistics. They’re no particular guarantee of anything. The point here is to live as if you have no idea when you’ll die, because you don’t! That being the case, do you really want to waste all those hours on bad television shows?

DAEMONS

- Near the end of the second book of the *Meditations*, Marcus writes:

What then can guide a person? One thing and only one, philosophy. But this consists in keeping the daemon within us free from violence and unharmed, superior to pains and pleasures, doing nothing without a purpose, nor yet falsely and with hypocrisy.
- In pre-Christian times, *daemon* did not necessarily have a negative connotation. The Greeks and Romans recognized both good and bad daemons. In modern terms, a good daemon is our conscience.

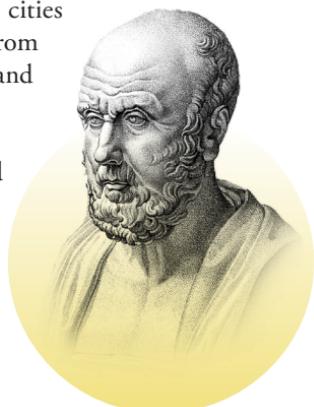
- Socrates used to go around saying that he had a daemon on his shoulder, and the daemon would advise him on what to do in difficult circumstances. When asked what the daemon's most common advice was, Socrates said: "Don't do it."
- In Marcus's quoted statement, his daemon is telling him to not do violence to his conscience. He is to do what he deems right and not shameful. He should be superior to pain and pleasure, which doesn't mean being incapable of experiencing them but rather handling them in the right way. He should be neither false nor hypocritical, and he should do nothing without a purpose.
- In other words, we should live purposely and honestly, according to our consciences, and not as slaves to pleasure or pain. Pretty much all philosophies and religions of the world have converged on that recipe.

VIEW FROM ABOVE

- At the beginning of book three of the *Meditations*, Marcus veers toward a contemplation of death and its aftermath. He writes:

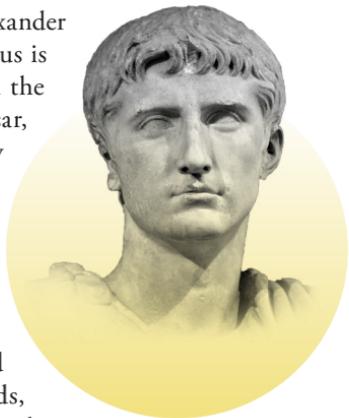
Hippocrates, after curing many diseases, himself fell sick and died. ... Alexander and Pompeius and Gaius Caesar, after so often completely destroying whole cities ... themselves, too, at last departed from life. ... And lice destroyed Democritus; and other lice killed Socrates.

- Hippocrates of Kos,^{***} the most renowned physician of the ancient world, lived from 460 to 375 BCE and died at the age of 85. As Marcus says, he cured many diseases, and yet he succumbed in the end because he was mortal.



*** The Hippocratic oath of medicine, a pledge to act ethically, is named after Hippocrates.

- The Alexander to whom Marcus refers is Alexander of Macedon, known as “the Great.” Pompeius is the Roman general Gnaeus Pompeius, and the third individual Marcus names, Gaius Caesar, is none other than Pompeius’s contemporary and rival, Julius Caesar.
- These were famous generals and conquerors who destroyed many cities and killed countless individuals. But they could not escape the final curtain: Alexander by disease at the age of 32, Pompeius betrayed and beheaded by those he deemed friends, and Caesar in a bloody conspiracy joined by his adopted son.
- What Marcus is contemplating in addressing this list of ill-fated historical figures is an exercise in broadening his perspective. It’s what modern Stoics refer to as the view from above.
- Whenever we get too caught up in our daily problems, we are urged to direct our thinking toward the larger expanse of time and the struggles of those who preceded us. The point isn’t that our problems are unimportant but rather that they should be considered in the wider context of human affairs.
- The penultimate character in Marcus’s list is the ancient philosopher Democritus, who, despite his lofty vision of the cosmos, died from an attack of lice. The last entry is Socrates himself, who was killed by “another lice,” meaning envious and treacherous Athenians who condemned him to death on the charge of corrupting the youth of the city by teaching them what today we call critical thinking.



ATARAXIA

- One of the most interesting, and commonly misunderstood, passages of book four of the *Meditations* states: “The universe is transformation: life is opinion.”

- Marcus isn't endorsing moral relativism, in which anyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's. The Stoics firmly believed that some human judgments are right and others are wrong. Instead, Marcus is reminding us of two fundamental aspects of Stoic metaphysics, both of which have profound implications for how we lead our lives.
- The doctrine that the universe is in transformation was originally espoused by the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who was a major influence on the Stoics. Everything changes; everything is impermanent. We should not get too attached to anything or anyone but rather tread lightly, thinking of people and things as not really ours, but rather as borrowed from the universe. And we should keep in mind that the universe can recall the loan at any time, for any reason.
- What Marcus means by "life is opinion" could be that value judgments are not intrinsic in things or events themselves. Rather, they reflect human opinion. And human opinion is fallible. That suggests that we should always be on guard against our own judgments, especially if they are not the result of careful and critical reflection.
- Combine the two ideas and you get the Stoic recipe for what they called ataraxia: a mental state of serenity, founded on an attitude of equanimity toward what happens to us. And that is what Marcus Aurelius kept striving for until the end of his life.

CONCLUSION

- Near the end of the fourth book of the *Meditations*, Marcus writes, "Remember, too, on every occasion that leads you to vexation to apply this principle: not that this is a misfortune, but that to bear it nobly is good fortune."
- Sure, life is going to test us on all this high-minded pretension of noble virtues and self-control. But when we face an unpleasant experience, or unpleasant individual, let's not look at it as a burden. Instead, let's think of it as an opportunity to make good on our self-discipline and values. Doing so becomes an affirmation of our own good fortune.

- This sort of attitude is counseled by modern cognitive behavioral therapists and is a timeless recipe for turning ourselves from helpless victims of circumstances to resilient human beings capable of doing our best with whatever the universe throws our way.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Aurelius, *Meditations*.

QUESTION

- ↗ Why does Marcus Aurelius begin his *Meditations* with an entire chapter in which the emperor thanks people who influenced him?

Answer on page 183

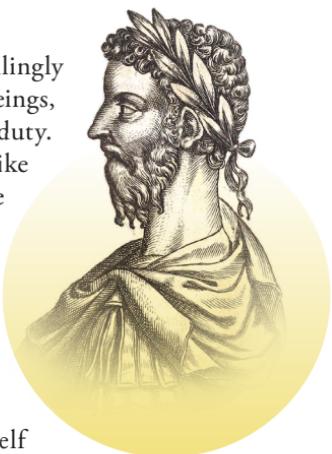


MARCUS AURELIUS, VIRTUE, AND THE VINEYARD

Compiled and published as the *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius's personal diary provides us with, among other things, a splendid example of one of the most important Stoic practices: philosophical journaling, the habit of writing down and reflecting analytically on what we do and why. This lesson looks at some highlights of the next four volumes.

THE STOIC SENSE OF DUTY

- Marcus begins by exhorting us to rise willingly each morning to do the work of human beings, reflecting his typically Stoic sense of duty. There were things he didn't want to do—like being emperor and fighting wars—but he understood this was his lot in life and acted accordingly. Following Stoic philosophy, we are all members of the human cosmopolis. Each of us is interdependent and benefits from everyone else.
- He then writes, “Have I been made for this, to lie under the blankets and keep myself warm? But this is more pleasant.” This no doubt resonates with everyone who has trouble getting up in the morning. But Marcus reminds himself that pleasure is fine only so long as it doesn't interfere with our obligations and commitments. It is our goals and projects that provide meaning to life, not an endless sequence of pleasures.



Marcus concluded by writing, “When someone has done a good act, they do not call out for others to come and see, but rather go on to another act, as a vine goes on to produce again the grapes in season.” The vine keeps on producing grapes without the need to be praised for it. Accordingly, we should do what’s right because it’s right, not in hopes that someone will commend us for it.

MINDFULNESS

Stoicism is also a self-forgiving philosophy. Marcus reminds us of this when he says:

Do not be disgusted, discouraged, or dissatisfied if you do not succeed in doing everything according to right principles; but when you have failed, return again, and be content if the greater part of what you do is consistent with human nature.

Only the perfect Stoic—a sage—never makes mistakes. And sages are rare. The Stoic philosopher Seneca said that sages appear at about the same frequency as the phoenix, the mythological bird that rises from its ashes.* For the rest of us non-sages, continued effort is the path to improvement, even if we occasionally slip backward.

Mary volunteers at the local soup kitchen. It comes naturally to say that her action is good because she’s helping others. But that conclusion focuses on the action itself, not on the agent who performs the action. A virtue ethicist would want to know why Mary volunteers at the soup kitchen. If she does it because she’s genuinely concerned with the welfare of the poor and homeless, then the action is virtuous. But if she does it only in order to add a line to her resume so that she can get a better job, then the action is not virtuous.



* According to Roman lore, the phoenix came back to life every 500 years.

- Marcus tells us how we can work toward becoming better human beings through a metaphor. He writes:

Such as are your habitual thoughts, such also will be the character of your mind; for the soul is dyed by the thoughts. Dye it then with a continuous series of such thoughts as these: for instance, that where a person can live, they can also live well; now it is possible to live at court, so it must also be possible to live well at court.

- Marcus didn't enjoy life at the imperial palace. He would have been happier to spend his time reading and discoursing with some of his mentors. But he reminds himself that the Stoics teach us that we can live well anywhere, because what we truly need—our character—is always with us.
- Just as dye colors wool, so do our thoughts color our minds. This notion that we are what we think and that we change our habits of thought by repetition over time is common to other ancient philosophers, particularly Aristotle. And it finds good empirical evidence in modern times.
- If you wish to follow the emperor's example, be mindful of how you think, and nudge your thoughts in the right direction. Little by little, your mind will go there by itself.

OBSTACLES

- But a good life is not made just of proper thoughts; effective action is also required. Marcus tells himself:

Our actions may be impeded ... but there can be no impeding our intentions or our dispositions. ... Because we can accommodate and adapt. The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.

- We often encounter problems that appear to be like brick walls if tackled head on. But there are other ways to overcome these walls. We can go over them, under them, or around them.

- Here, Stoicism comes close to the Eastern philosophy of Daoism, which famously includes the principle of *de*, meaning “responding by attuning.” The idea is that by training ourselves to respond to circumstances by adapting instead of resisting them, we attune ourselves to how the world works.
- Daoist lore exemplifies the point through the legendary character of Dayu as he faced a potentially destructive flood. The natural thing for him to have done would have been to resist the flood with, perhaps, a protective embankment. Instead, Dayu worked to redirect the water, accommodating its natural flow. The channels he dug served as outlets and irrigated his farmland.

OBJECTIVE DESCRIPTION

- One passage in book six of the *Meditations* is often cited as indicative of Marcus’s supposedly sour character, and more broadly as a demonstration of the inadequacy of Stoicism as a philosophy of life. He states:

When you have savories and fine dishes set before you, you will gain an idea of their nature if you tell yourself that this is the corpse of a fish, and that the corpse of a bird or a pig; or again, that fine Falernian^{**} wine is merely grape-juice, and this purple robe some sheep’s wool dipped in the blood of a shellfish;^{***} and as for sexual intercourse, it is the friction of a piece of gut and, following a sort of convulsion, the expulsion of mucus.

- Should we conclude from this passage that Marcus disliked gourmet food, rejected excellent wine, and didn’t like sex? Quite the contrary. He was engaged in a standard Stoic exercise: redescribing things that we are a little too fond of in objective, neutral terms in order to distance ourselves a bit from our pleasures.

^{**} Falernian was the best wine money could buy you in ancient Rome.

^{***} The imperial color was Tyrian purple, which was obtained by soaking garments in the blood of a predatory sea snail.

- Marcus had at least 12 children, and when his wife Faustina died, he took a mistress. So, he wasn't averse to sex. He was also known to have a temper—something he actively worked to restrain all his life. He was probably reminding himself that even the imperial color was to be taken down a notch or two.
- The point is to counter excessive emotional attachment to things with a bit of objective description so that we own our pleasures, not the other way around.

OPINIONS

- A bit later, Marcus tackles another human trait: the lust for fame. He writes:

How strangely men act. They will not praise those who are living at the same time and living with themselves; but to be themselves praised by posterity, by those whom they have never seen or ever will see, this they set much value on.

- Here, Marcus observes that many people are obsessed with leaving an enduring legacy. But posterity is defined by future generations: people we do not know and never will know. Why be concerned about what they will think of us? Why not focus on the people who are alive right now and whose opinions may actually be of value to us?
- Marcus continues on the topic of other's opinions:

If anyone is able to convince me and show me that I do not think or act right, I will gladly change; for I seek the truth by which no one was ever injured. But they are injured who abide in their error and ignorance.

- This would be a welcome attitude in anyone, but particularly so in an emperor, with the disproportionate power he had over people's lives. Stated otherwise, to the Stoics, ignorance is a defect.

CHANGE

- In book seven, Marcus tackles another recurring Stoic theme: the inevitability—and necessity—of change. Human beings have a natural resistance to change. We feel more comfortable with the devil we know. Change, particularly of the unexpected variety, throws us off, causing stress and anxiety. The Stoics believed this is because we fail to accept that change is both natural and necessary. Nothing good or bad would ever happen if things were not constantly changing.
- The underlying metaphysics comes from one of the pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus, who influenced Marcus. Heraclitus is famous for having said that we never step into the same river twice. A river is not a fixed object; it's a dynamic entity. And so are we, as human beings, which means that we also are constantly changing.
- Remember that for a Stoic, the only truly good things are those that improve our character, and the only bad things are those that undermine our character. Everything else needs to be approached with equanimity. Sometimes things go our way and the change will benefit us. At other times, the corresponding change will not benefit us. It is what it is.
- This view of the world is liberating because it leads us to embrace change rather than resist it. Knowing change is inevitable will reduce our anxiety and nudge us toward a more serene existence.

POSSESSIONS

- A bit later, Marcus engages in a different meditation aimed at reinforcing his appreciation for his spiritual and material possessions. He writes:

Think not so much of what you lack as of what you have: but of the things that you have, select the best, and then reflect how eagerly you would have sought them if you did not have them. At the same time, however, take care that you do not through being so pleased with them accustom yourself to overvalue them, so as to be disturbed if you should ever not have them.

- Research in modern cognitive science shows that people tend to be miserable when they focus on what they don't have. Yet we feel happy when we turn our attention to what we do have, especially as part of an explicit exercise in gratitude.
- Marcus then directs his thoughts to how he would feel if he did not possess the best of the things he already has. This focus helps him to train his desire on those very things instead of new ones. And this comes from a man who could have had whatever he wanted, as emperor of Rome at the height of its power.
- Lastly, Marcus reminds himself not to get too attached to his possessions. Fortune is fickle, and what it gives can just as easily be taken away. For this reason, Stoics—like Buddhists—aim at developing light attachments to things and even people. Everything is transitory. We should enjoy what's with us and not experience regret when it's gone. Nothing lasts forever.

THE ART OF LIFE

- Philosophy was perceived as the art of life in antiquity. The job of the philosopher from Socrates onward was to practice and teach this art to others. Even so, Marcus warned: "The art of life is more like the wrestler's art than the dancer's, in respect of this, that it should stand ready and firm to meet onsets that are sudden and unexpected."
- The reason life feels more like wrestling than dancing to Marcus is because we always need to be on guard. Life can throw us a punch at any moment, from any direction. This might sound bleak, but it's a realistic view of things, even today.
- Regardless of how lucky we might be—even surrounded by friends and family, with a fulfilling career, and in good health—we will, at some point, experience setbacks. An on-guard stance does not preclude us from enjoying life when things go well; it simply prepares us for the inevitable tumble so we can deal with setbacks as they occur.

- Marcus continues with this pragmatism, writing,

“A cucumber is bitter.” Throw it away. “There are briars in the road.” Turn aside from them. This is enough. Do not add, “And why were such things made in the world?”

- Don’t like bitter cucumbers? Don’t eat them. There’s no sense in complaining about the bitter cucumbers in the world. It’s a fact of life. Just accept it, and be grateful you don’t have to eat the cucumbers!

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Aurelius, *Meditations*.

QUESTION

- ↗ Marcus Aurelius reminds himself in the morning that he will probably encounter ungrateful and unjust people. How is he supposed to react to that?

Answer on page 183



MARCUS AURELIUS ON MANAGING TURMOIL

This lesson concludes our study of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* with an examination of the last four volumes. It then discusses two major philosophers who inspired Marcus: the pre-Socratic Heraclitus and the early 2nd-century Stoic Epictetus.

CATASTROPHIZING

- In the *Meditations*, Marcus expresses that things don't come with labels as to whether they are good or bad, wonderful or catastrophic. Things just are. He then asks, "What is it, then, that passes judgment on them?"
- He explains that humans are endowed with a ruling faculty that applies judgment to what we see happening. Our judgments aren't necessarily correct, but we have the power to revise such conclusions. Marcus says he is able to cast out all his troubles because the trouble isn't inherent in objective facts about the world but rather in his own subjective judgments about them.
- The emperor wrote these words while fighting the Marcomanni and other German tribes on the northern frontier. How could it possibly be that a war against invading, determined, and well-armed tribes is not trouble?
- Wars are a fact of human existence, especially in the time and place that characterized Marcus Aurelius's life. Sometimes those wars went in favor of the Romans, and sometimes they didn't. Marcus knew perfectly well that the situation he was facing was part of life and to be dealt with on its own terms. Better, therefore, to approach it with a serene mind rather than a mind stressed out by self-generated thoughts of catastrophe.

- It's a well-known principle of modern cognitive behavioral therapy that catastrophizing our problems—that is, indulging in dark, negative thinking about them—is unlikely to help solve a problem. It's more likely to make it worse. Objective features of the world might trigger our debilitating doubts and negative judgments, but we also possess the power to revise our views and actually tackle whatever issue we face.

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

- We can act rationally to make the world a better place by being mindful about what sort of labels we want applied to ourselves. Marcus states this as follows:

When you have assumed these names—good, modest, truthful, rational, a man of equanimity, and magnanimous—take care that you do not change these names; and if you should lose them, quickly return to them.

- This is a classic Stoic mental exercise. Think about which attributes you would like to reflect your character and keep them in mind whenever you act. Should you discover through critical self-reflection that some of those labels don't fit you well, make a concerted effort to redress the problem so that you can justifiably get back to thinking of yourself as someone who is good, modest, and truthful.
- Near the end of book nine, Marcus gives a specific application of some of the qualities he wishes to cultivate. He writes:

When you are offended at any man's fault, immediately turn to yourself and reflect in what manner you yourself have erred: for example, in thinking that money is a good thing or pleasure, or a bit of reputation, and the like.

- When someone offends us, it's natural to turn self-righteous. Then we pause, think back to all those instances when we have done something of the same kind, and realize that we are hardly better than those we criticize. Perhaps we should be more magnanimous toward others and become more focused on improving ourselves.

CASSIUS'S REBELLION

- Marcus picks up the same theme at the beginning of book 11 of the *Meditations*, when he writes:

Shall any man hate me? That will be his affair. But I will be mild and benevolent toward every man, and ready to show even him his mistake, not reproachfully, nor yet as making a display of my endurance, but nobly and honestly.

- He put this into practice during one of the most difficult moments of his reign: the rebellion of one of his generals, Gaius Avidius Cassius, in the year 175 CE. This occurred just as the emperor was preparing to wind down his defensive war against the Marcomanni tribe along the empire's northern frontier.
- Cassius heard a rumor that Marcus was dying, which became a serious threat to Marcus's reign and the stability of the empire.* But Marcus's response was measured and informed by the ideal of equanimity that he so often reminds himself to practice in the *Meditations*. He gave a reassuring speech to his troops and to the Roman Senate, and he assembled enough legions to counter the threat.
- At the same time, he hoped to resolve his dispute with Cassius without bloodshed. As it happened, Cassius was killed by two of his own centurions. But afterward, Marcus asked the Senate to not engage in the usual revenge aimed at supporters of the revolt but instead to spare them or send them into exile.



* The rumor might have been spread by Faustina, Marcus's wife, to convince Cassius to rise up.

- In this, Marcus was practicing the philosophy and discipline of a Stoic, even though he'd experienced a great personal threat and easily could have indulged in the sort of retribution typical of Roman emperors.

IMPULSE

- According to the Stoics, the key to ethical self-improvement is to constantly remind ourselves of what is the right thing to do. Marcus does exactly that in the 12th and final book of the *Meditations*, where he writes, “If it is not right, do not do it: if it is not true, do not say it. For let your impulse be in your own power.”
- *Impulse* is a technical Stoic word with a rather different meaning from its modern English counterpart. It doesn't indicate something we do without thinking, or yielding to temptation. Rather, impulse is the movement that initiates action once we've decided to do something.
- Stoic impulse could be an automatic decision that we take without thinking, and it could result in yielding to some temptation that we might later regret. But Marcus's point is that this doesn't have to be the case. We can exercise a veto power on our impulses—think first and then see if it's really a good idea.
- We might be tempted to do something that is not right, or to say something that is not true. But either action would undermine what Stoics value most—our character—and why would we want to do that?

HERACLITUS

- Marcus refers to Heraclitus and Epictetus throughout his *Meditations*, sometimes quoting them explicitly.
- From Heraclitus, Marcus draws the notion that the cosmos is characterized by reason: the logos. We are the only creatures in the universe that share in the logos, which means that we are the only rational animals. In a sense, this makes us not just special but close to divine.
- However, privileged status comes with responsibilities. We have a duty to use reason to help not just ourselves but all humanity. By virtue of such participation, human beings are the only creatures to which the moral category applies because we are the only ones capable of deliberating and deciding on what appears to us as the best course of action.

- A second theme of the *Meditations* derives from Heraclitus's notion that change is a universal and inevitable characteristic of the world. He was famous for saying that we never step into the same river twice. Both we and the river are not static objects but dynamic processes.
- Marcus infers an ethical injunction from this, where ethics is understood broadly as the study of how to lead one's life. We must accept change, including when we are least inclined to, as in accepting our mortality and that of our loved ones.
- It's also clear throughout the *Meditations* that Marcus thinks most people don't pay much attention to the deeper aspects of what's going on—that we sort of sleepwalk through life. Heraclitus wrote: "Not comprehending, [people] hear like the deaf. The saying is their witness: absent while present." But Marcus reminds himself that many people don't want to actively commit evil; they simply lack wisdom. The proper approach toward rectification is first to try to teach them, and if that fails, to endure their mistakes.
- Lastly, Heraclitus noted that the same thing can be either valuable or deadly depending on who is using it. He says, "The sea is the purest and foulest water: for fish drinkable and life-sustaining; for human beings undrinkable and deadly."
- Marcus dwells on similar examples but derives his own original lesson from them, writing, "Honey tastes bitter to a man with jaundice. People with rabies are terrified of water. And a child's idea of beauty is a ball. Why does that upset you?"
- That people have different perceptions and opinions about things should cause us no disturbance. If we agree with such opinions, all is well. But if we disagree, what is that to us?

EPICTETUS

- Marcus derives much of his practical ethics from a second influential source, Epictetus. For this ancient Greek philosopher, in turn, Socrates was the ultimate role model and paragon of virtue. Marcus shares Epictetus's admiration for Socrates, mentioning the Athenian sage several times.

- The use of ethical role models was an important part of ancient philosophical education. It was thought that one learns how to behave ethically by studying the examples of people who are worthy of our admiration.
- Another theme Marcus takes from Epictetus is the notion that—as Christians would later put it—the flesh is weak, but the spirit can be strong. Epictetus suggested that we should identify our core being with our minds rather than our bodies. We share our bodily wants and instincts with other animals, but what really distinguishes us is our logos.
- Marcus also embraces Epictetus's attitude toward death. To die is natural, expected, and no real trouble. But while alive, we cannot allow other people to get in the way of us doing the right thing, which is using reason to help society.
- The last big idea Marcus absorbs from Epictetus is the notion of life as theater, in which we all play a variety of roles. For Epictetus, our proper job as human beings is to perform these roles in the best way possible.
- These roles are not to be played passively, as if we were marionettes in the hands of a puppet master, but rather with flexibility and a sense of duty. There are many ways to be a good human being, a good mother, a good son, or a good friend.

Marcus writes, "My city and country, so far as I am Antoninus, is Rome; but so far as I am a man, it is the world," meaning that although he certainly has duties to Rome as its first citizen, his most fundamental allegiance is to the whole of humanity.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Aurelius, *Meditations*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What is the ruling faculty?

Answer on page 183



FROM STOIC SELF-MASTERY TO COSMOPOLITANISM

This lesson discusses one of the most influential—and least-known—of the Stoics: Musonius Rufus, who lived in Rome during the 1st century. We'll also look another influential Stoic who lived a century later: Hierocles, who articulated the most famous version of the Stoic notion of cosmopolitanism.

MUSONIUS RUFUS

- Musonius was born in the Etruscan city of Volsinii, north of Rome. He was a follower of the Stoic Roman nobleman Gaius Rubellius Plautus, who was a rival of the emperor Nero.
- Nero exiled Plautus in the year 60, and Musonius followed his friend out of loyalty as well as dislike for the emperor's tyrannical ways. Both Plautus and Musonius were part of the Stoic opposition, a group of senators and philosophers who dared to criticize Nero and two of his successors, Vespasian and Domitian.
- Nero had Plautus executed two years later. At this time, Musonius returned to Rome. He was then accused of participating in the failed Pisonian conspiracy against the emperor.* Musonius was exiled on the rugged Greek island of Gyaros, which he remarked was an ideal place to practice Stoicism because it was difficult to endure. He created a small philosophical community there.



* Another famous Stoic philosopher, Seneca, lost his life as a suspected party to this same failed conspiracy.

- Musonius returned to Rome in 68, and a few months later he found himself under the first emperor of the new Flavian dynasty, Vespasian. During this period, he taught his most famous student, Epictetus, who later would become one of the most celebrated Stoics of all time.
- Musonius himself was so well regarded that when Vespasian banned all philosophers from Rome on the grounds that they were a political nuisance, Musonius was allowed to stay—but not for long. His penchant for speaking truth to power eventually proved too much for Vespasian, and the emperor exiled him again in the year 71.
- After Vespasian died eight years later, Musonius once more returned to Rome, where he presumably passed away around the year 101.
- Unfortunately, not much written material about Musonius survives. He probably didn't write anything down himself. What we do have is a collection of lectures and sayings put together by one of Musonius's students, the otherwise-unknown Lucius. In turn, the 5th-century Greek anthologist Joannes Stobaeus preserved the material.

LEARNING

- Musonius's first lecture discusses an enduring problem of philosophy: that much of it has an unfortunate tendency of navel-gazing. Philosophers enjoy an argument for its own sake and delight in exercising their powers of logical analysis. But Musonius made this point: "Only by exhibiting actions in harmony with the sound words which he has received will anyone be helped by philosophy."
- Notice the emphasis on doing things in agreement with what one says. This notion would surprise many modern academic philosophers. By and large, they don't see themselves as role models but rather as simple technicians, spending their lives teaching specialized courses and writing about specialized matters. Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and a host of others would have been seriously puzzled at the attitude of modern philosophers.
- Still, Musonius does not discard the value of theoretical learning. In his second lecture, he builds on Socrates's argument that virtue is a skill and as such can be taught. Sure, there might be people who are naturally

more or less inclined to display good character, as Aristotle argued. Some people are naturally talented at music or playing soccer. But everyone can learn to play a little music or kick a ball.

- Even so, those with talent won't go far without further learning and application. That's why if our goal is to become better human beings, it's important to learn from good philosophers.

WOMEN IN STOICISM

- In his third lecture, Musonius makes a statement that was surprising at the time, though plenty of Stoics had echoed it since the founding of the philosophy by Zeno of Citium almost 400 years earlier. Musonius says:

Women have received from the gods the same reasoning power as men—the power which we employ with each other and according to which we consider whether each action is good or bad, and honorable or shameful.

- Feminism, as the saying goes, is the radical notion that women are human beings. By that definition, the Stoics were feminists, though the label should not be applied anachronistically. It was Zeno himself, in his work *Republic*, who first said what Musonius restated centuries later, and we find the same sentiment in the 1st-century Stoic Seneca.
- Musonius elaborates on this topic in his fourth lecture, stating:

It is obvious that there is not one type of virtue for a man and another for a woman. To begin with, a man must have good sense, and so must a woman. What, after all, would be the usefulness of a foolish man or woman? ... As far as the virtues of a man and a woman are concerned, it is entirely appropriate for both men and women to have the same upbringing and education. ... Just as no man would be properly educated without philosophy, so no woman would be either.

- Unfortunately, we still witness a good number of people who have trouble with this basic notion about human nature.

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

- In the sixth lecture, we're told a bit more about the point of living our philosophy. Musonius says:

The person who wants to be good must not only learn the lessons which pertain to virtue but train themselves to follow them eagerly and rigorously. Could someone acquire instant self-control by merely knowing that they must not be conquered by pleasures but without training to resist them?

- In order to understand this, imagine that you've never played tennis. Someone can explain the rules of the game and give you a basic introduction to how to hold and swing a racquet. But that doesn't mean you're ready to play at Wimbledon. You'll need to practice with a patient, willing partner. Only after a while will you be ready for your first game—which you'll probably lose. It takes years to become a decent tennis player, and few make it to Wimbledon.
- The same goes for philosophical practice. A philosopher can explain to you in a matter of minutes what temperance is, and you'll likely instantly understand. But that won't make you a temperate person.
- Musonius's 18th lecture gives a good example of how such practice might go. He says:

Mastering one's appetites for food and drink is the beginning of and basis for self-control. ... The more often we are tempted by gastronomic pleasure, the greater the danger it presents. And, indeed, at each meal, there is not one chance for making a mistake, but several.

- If you want to become more temperate, you can start at the dinner table. It can be exceedingly difficult to control how much we eat and drink, but the failure to do so is not good for our physical or spiritual health. That's why Musonius says temperance in that department is the beginning of—and basis for—self-control.

- It helps to practice a couple of mental tricks. First, don't think you're depriving yourself by not reaching for another glass of wine or a third helping of the main dish. Instead, remind yourself that you're improving your character—you're doing something positive for yourself.
- Second, reframe what you're doing as a challenge rather than a sacrifice. Give yourself points every time you succeed at exercising temperance. And be forgiving of yourself when you inevitably slip. You're a human being, not a sage.

PLEASURE AND VIRTUE

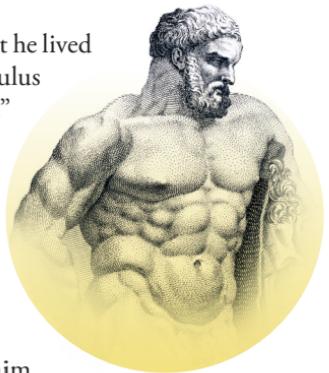
- Musonius tackles some different aspects of the tension between pleasure and virtue in his seventh lecture. The message is that many people seem to think that a life spent working on their character is just too much work. And yet many of those same people willingly put themselves in situations that require a lot of effort, sometimes with a lot of pain and humiliation.
- The problem is not that achieving a worthy objective is hard; the problem is that people disagree on what constitutes a worthy objective. In other words, they arrive at different judgments about things, which is why philosophy—which can, in part, be understood as the art of refining our judgments—should play a primary role in our lives.
- Musonius elaborates:

Wouldn't everyone agree that it is much better to work to gain control over one's own desires than it is to work to gain possession of someone else's wife—and for a person to train himself to want little instead of struggling to become wealthy? And instead of exerting effort to gain fame, shouldn't a person strive to overcome his thirst for it?

- Well, to be fair, not everyone agrees with what Musonius suggests. But the point is that the disagreement is about values. To see them laid out in such a sharp contrast ought to help us see things more clearly. And clarifying issues is another major role of philosophy.

HIEROCLES

- We don't know much about Hierocles except that he lived in the 2nd century and—so the commentator Aulus Gellius tells us—he was “a grave and holy man.”
- Some 300 lines from his most important work, *Elements of Ethics*, were discovered at Hermopolis, in Egypt, in 1901. Other than that, we have a few other fragments preserved by Joannes Stobaeus, the same man to whom we owe the survival of Musonius Rufus’s lectures.
- Hierocles, despite the paucity of sources about him, is famous for his rendition of two fundamental and highly interconnected classical Stoic concepts: *oikeiosis* and cosmopolitanism.
- *Oikeiosis* is translated from the Greek variously as “appropriation,” “familiarization,” “affiliation,” and in a number of other ways that simply do not communicate the original meaning. The etymology of the word is somewhat more helpful. *Oikos* means household and is the root of the English word *ecology*. It essentially denotes a sense of belonging—the opposite of alienation.
- Within the Stoic framework, *oikeiosis* is a process that begins at birth and continues throughout life. It begins as something instinctual, but over time, practicing it is a deliberate choice that humans make as rational beings.
- The instinct of all animals, humans included, is to protect ourselves: to look after our immediate interests. However, in social species—particularly ours—we also see the development of a concern for those who immediately surround us, especially our caretakers.
- That is the first step of the *oikeiotic* process: from “me” to a localized “us.” Even as children, we develop an interest in an expanded circle of people, including relatives and friends. And when we begin to contemplate abstract notions, we gradually see that there’s nothing particularly special about us. We understand that strangers in the same city, or on the other side of the world, are also human beings. That means it’s reasonable and just to treat them fairly, as we would like them to treat us.



- So, *oikeiosis*, describes this process of expanding circles of concern, with the outermost circle being the one that includes the entire human race. And that is the Stoic concept of cosmopolitanism.
- The concept of cosmopolitanism still has not won the day, despite being inherent, or explicit, in a number of philosophies and religions. And yet it's arguably the only way for us to overcome our superficial differences and focus on our shared humanity in order to end poverty and war and build a better future for everyone.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Holiday and Hanselman, *Lives of the Stoics*.

QUESTION

- ↗ Musonius Rufus says that the best exercise of the virtue of temperance is at the dinner table. Why?

Answer on page 184

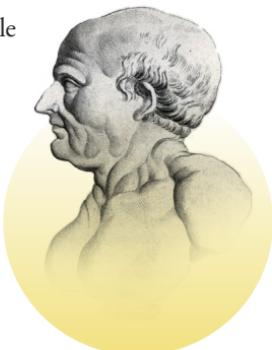


DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM STOIC ROLE MODELS

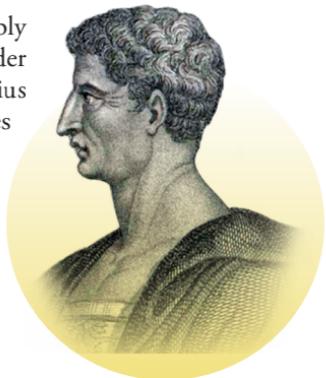
The goal of Stoic philosophy is to make us into the best, most ethical human beings we can be. This is accomplished by paying attention to what we do and making sure we arrive at the best decisions possible. But the ancient Stoics also recognized that people can fool themselves into justifying a particular course of action that might be more convenient than ethical. We can counter this natural tendency to stray by choosing role models whose characters we can emulate.

CATO THE YOUNGER

- Cato the Younger is one person Seneca suggests as a role model. He was one of the most respected politicians and generals of the late Roman Republic.
- One example of his uncompromising character, though almost surely apocryphal, is recounted by the Greek historian Plutarch. In the year 91 BCE, a family friend named Pompaedius Silo was said to be visiting the youth's home when the boy improbably made critical remarks about Silo's views on land reform.
- This upset Silo so much that he grabbed the young Cato by his ankles and dangled him out of a window. Silo threatened to drop the youth unless Cato agreed that the land reforms Silo had endorsed were good for Rome. Cato allegedly just stared at his captor until Silo gave up, pulled him back, and said, "How lucky for Italy that he is a boy; if he were a man, I don't think we could get a single vote."



- A few years later, a second episode that probably did happen is also telling. Rome had fallen under the control of a dictator named Lucius Cornelius Sulla after a bloody civil war. Sulla began a series of reprisals against his political enemies, killing scores of them and enriching himself and his friends with the profits from the sale of the victims' properties. Cato, now a teenager, was often a guest of the dictator and witnessed some of these atrocities in person.
- But one day, while returning home from one of Sulla's horrific sessions, Cato asked his tutor why nobody got rid of the tyrant. The tutor told him that "men fear him more than they hate him." Cato responded, "Give me a sword, so I might kill him and set my country free of slavery." From that day on, each time they left home, the tutor apparently checked to see if Cato was hiding a dagger, just in case.
- Later yet, as an adult politician and revenue official in the territory of Cyprus, Cato refused to engage in the usual corrupt and self-enriching behavior of Roman administrators. A saying developed in Rome that whenever someone wanted to excuse himself for not being as ethical as he might have been, he would say, "Well, not everyone can be a Cato!"



CATO'S DEATH

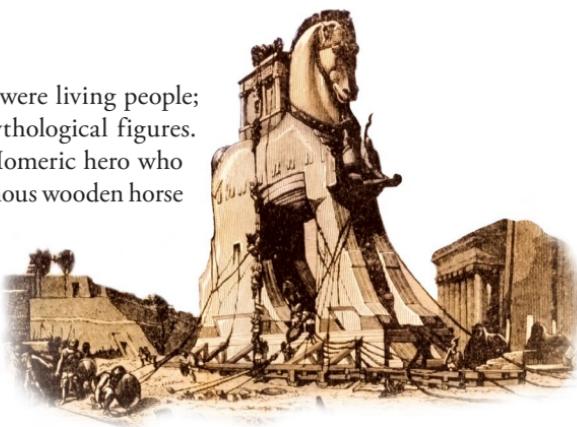
- The story of how Cato died is often mentioned by Seneca as the quintessential example of Stoic virtue and courage.
- Cato joined Pompey the Great's republican army against Caesar. Caesar would defeat Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BCE, but Cato collected the remainder of the rebel army and took a last stand at Utica, in modern-day Tunisia.

Centuries later, Dante gave Cato a prime role in his narrative poem *The Divine Comedy*, having the Stoic stand guard at the entrance of the Mountain of Purgatory. As the poet put it, "What man on earth was more worthy to signify God than Cato? Surely none."

- In the final Battle of Thapsus in 46 BCE, the Caesarian legions, although outnumbered, nevertheless managed to defeat Cato's republicans. And Caesar made clear that he wanted Cato captured alive so that he could use him as a political pawn. Cato had different intentions.
- After a last dinner and conversation with his family and friends, Cato retired to his room to read Plato's *Phaedo*, which recounts the last hours of Socrates's life, also spent in philosophical conversation with friends.
- Once Cato had finished reading, he picked up his dagger and tried to stab himself to death, though he failed due to an injury to his hand. Though he didn't immediately die of the wound, Plutarch tells us he then "thrust away the physician, plucked out his own bowels, and tearing open the wound, immediately expired."
- Now, the idea of a Stoic role model isn't that one needs to be ready to do the sort of things Cato did. Rather, the idea is to think of ordinary and extraordinary people we admire and to try to pattern our behavior on theirs—not literally, but in terms of striving to do the right thing. Cato is rather exceptional even from a Stoic perspective. That's why Seneca also mentions Gaius Laelius Sapiens,* who was wise in public dealings and a staunch and reliable friend, as an ideal role model.

ODYSSEUS

- Not all Stoic role models were living people; some were imaginary, mythological figures. One was Odysseus, the Homeric hero who captured Troy with his famous wooden horse and then spent 10 years making his way home to his wife and son, with all sorts of obstacles thrown his way by the angry god Poseidon.



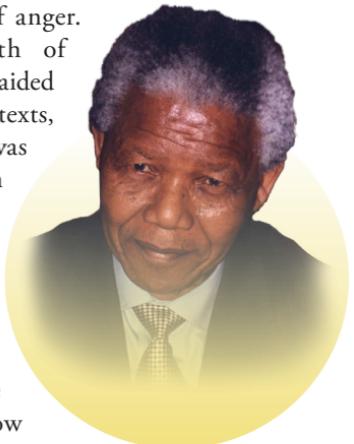
* Laelius was consul, Rome's highest political position, in the year 140 BCE.

- Odysseus—or Ulysses, as the Romans called him—embodied a major tenet of Stoicism in the obligation to cheerfully submit to one's fate while at the same time showing that this doesn't equate to quietism. That's why Seneca and his fellow Stoics, Musonius Rufus and Epictetus, all commented favorably on the Odysseus legend.
- Odysseus is a role model for the Stoics because he was committed to playing his roles in life while at the same time not confusing such roles with who he more fundamentally was. He was the king of Ithaca, a warrior on the planes of Troy, the captain of his ship during the voyage home, a faithful husband to Penelope, and an inspiring father to his son Telemachus. But he also seems to have had a moral purpose that transcended his individual roles. He was steadfast, loyal, determined, and courageous.
- Another reason Odysseus was a favorite of the Roman Stoics is that the Stoic philosophers Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and several others had all been persecuted and exiled, just as Odysseus had been persecuted by the god Poseidon and exiled to a number of places. When Odysseus landed at Phaeacia, he was alone, naked, and shipwrecked. Yet by the time he left the island, he was wealthy, with a new transport back home.
- Epictetus used Odysseus to illustrate his idea that we don't have to spend all of our lives in a single place. Learning and respecting other people's ways is very much in line with the Stoic notion of cosmopolitanism, which is the idea that all human beings are fundamentally deserving of respect simply by virtue of being members of the human cosmopolis.

NELSON MANDELA

- A contemporary role model that fits the Stoic concept is Nelson Mandela, not because he was successful in his struggle to overthrow apartheid in South Africa—since the outcome was not under his control—but because of the way he went about it.
- During 27 years in prison, Mandela struggled with a very common, and in his case understandable, type of unhealthy emotion: anger. He was angry because he was forced to waste a large portion of his life in confinement and because of the injustices his people suffered.

- But Mandela decided not to act out of anger. Instead, he took the opposite path of understanding and reconciliation. He was aided by reading one of the foundational Stoic texts, Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. A copy was smuggled by fellow prisoners onto Robben Island, where Mandela was incarcerated for 18 of his 27 years in prison.
- Mandela decided that he wanted South Africa to be a successful nation and that such a nation could not be built on the basis of hatred or revenge. In the beginning, he did things that his fellow inmates considered misguided, to put it mildly. For instance, he learned the Afrikaans language. He studied his oppressors' culture. And he formed friendships with jailers to practice cooperation.
- Still, Mandela's approach was distinct from that of Gandhi in India. Gandhi had proposed to convert Hitler with charm. Mandela was too much of a realist for that. And Gandhi thought that rejection of anger necessarily implies pacifism. Mandela, like the Stoics, realized that non-anger does not mean nonviolence. Violence might be necessary, and even useful, when strategically deployed.
- Mandela ultimately proved successful at overthrowing the apartheid government, and he became the first Black president of South Africa. Later, he went against some of his own allies in the African National Congress to continue a policy of broader cooperation and reconciliation.
- When Mandela was accused of being too willing to look for the good in people, he responded, "Your duty is to work with human beings as human beings, not because you think they are angels." This is a phrase that could have been uttered by the 2nd-century Roman Stoic Marcus Aurelius.



SUSAN FOWLER

- Another role model for contemporary times is Susan Fowler, who is a modern Stoic. She grew up in the rural town of Yarnell, Arizona, as the second of seven children in a fundamentalist family. Her father was an evangelical preacher, and her mother was a homeschooler.
- Fowler felt that her education was lacking and began to pay frequent visits to the local public library. She eventually picked up the writings of Plutarch and the Stoics, which she explicitly credits with directing her focus toward what she could control in her life.
- Later, working as a software engineer, Fowler landed a job at a well-known transportation company, where she encountered what she described as a pervasive culture of sexual harassment. In February 2017, she wrote about her experience in a blog post that went viral and led to external probes that confirmed Fowler's accusations and resulted in the ousting of the company's CEO.
- As a result of her social activism, Fowler has received a number of awards, including being named one of the nation's top business and cultural leaders by *Vanity Fair* and being featured on the cover of *Time* magazine's Person of the Year issue.
- In an essay listing books that shaped her life, Fowler included Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, Epictetus's *The Enchiridion*, and Seneca's *On the Shortness of Life*. These are three major works of Stoicism that have survived since antiquity.

SPIDER-MAN

- Just like the ancient Stoics picked Odysseus as a role model, modern Stoics can refer to another fictional character: Spider-Man. The Peter Parker principle, which states that "with great power comes great responsibility," is in line with the Stoic notion that we have ethical responsibilities toward other human beings. We need to do the job of a human being, as Marcus Aurelius puts it, without waiting for utopia on earth, no matter how small our contributions may be.

- The famous phrase about power and responsibility has a long history stretching from the French Revolution to British Parliament and even Winston Churchill. But in the case of Spider-Man, the phrase is attributed to Uncle Ben. It's the very last thing Ben says to Peter just before he dies, and it sets the ethical framework for Peter's evolution as a superhero.
- Spider-Man is a reliable moral compass within the Marvel universe. Other superheroes are sometimes moved by motives that might not always be virtuous and may even do things that are morally questionable. Spider-Man, however, comes close to the Stoic ideal of always trying to do the right thing, helping others while treating them fairly and with dignity.
- No matter who you choose as your own role models, identifying them is an excellent exercise in self-discovery. You are making choices about how to model your own behavior. In turn, your choices become the straight ruler against which you are able to measure and regulate your character and walk the Stoic path.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Holiday and Hanselman, *Lives of the Stoics*.

QUESTION

- ↗ Why do Stoics think that we should consciously adopt role models in life?

Answer on page 184



HOW STOICS BEAR RESPONSIBILITY AND CONFLICT

We all play multiple roles throughout our lives, and these roles naturally produce conflicts. According to Epictetus, we can learn how to recognize the call for different roles by paying attention to our particular abilities, considering our social relations, exercising our personal choices, and listening for what he calls a divine sign.

PARTICULAR ABILITIES

- Epictetus believed we all possess certain aptitudes that lay the basis for many kinds of roles, from athlete to philosopher. These capacities immediately suggest the pursuit of certain specific roles. For example, Epictetus says if you want to be a wrestler, you will need certain physical characteristics, while the role of a philosopher requires “a certain readiness and [mental] fitness.”
- Referring to a famous character in Homer’s *Iliad*, Epictetus also says that “those who have extraordinary abilities should take up the role that employs their special talents.” It tends to be obvious to people what their talents are, Epictetus believed. And this points us to what we should do in life.
- The concept is bundled with the idea of self-worth, where people will naturally have a certain assessment of their own value. While we should not overestimate our self-worth—nor sell ourselves short—we should employ it in due measure. In other words, you are the one who knows your value and what you can contribute to society.

We realize, of course, that not everyone can be extraordinary, or, as Epictetus puts it, “not all horses can become swift.” But not all horses have to run either. They can be useful in different roles. If you’re not a thoroughbred, you can still be a good citizen of the human polis, and you can do that while keeping your integrity intact.

SOCIAL RELATIONS

- We realize, of course, that not everyone can be extraordinary, or, as Epictetus puts it, “not all horses can become swift.” But not all horses have to run either. They can be useful in different roles. If you’re not a thoroughbred, you can still be a good citizen of the human polis, and you can do that while keeping your integrity intact.
- Our social relations can be natural, such as parent and child, or acquired, like friend and neighbor. Importantly, Epictetus is clear that just because some roles are acquired doesn’t mean that we can pick them up and put them down at will. They come with responsibilities. Friendships might end, but they better end for good reason, or you will have failed in your role as a friend.
- He also makes clear that we should act virtuously under any circumstance because these are the conditions the universe throws at us to practice our virtue and strengthen our character.
- The advice to play the roles we have may be open to the charge that we are simply adopting and then reinforcing the customs of whatever society we happen to live in, which may or may not be a good thing. We should be able to question our roles if the situation requires it.
- In fact, Epictetus actively encourages defiance of society’s expectations if there are good reasons to be defiant. He talks about the Cynics—philosophers who were social troublemakers—flaunting standards of propriety to remind people there’s more to life than what the authorities tell us. And he advises us to obey our superiors or be insubordinate based on whether we have the ability to endure the consequences. Clearly, he does not give advice purely on the basis of convention.

PERSONAL CHOICES

- When it comes to personal choices in defining our roles, Epictetus says, “Who do you wish to be? First tell yourself that. Then act accordingly in what you are doing.” He advises his students to be cognizant of the requirements of their chosen careers but not to care about what other people think of their choices.

- Importantly, however, Epictetus also tells us that we should look at the needs of society when choosing a career and always keep the general good in mind in whatever choices we make. That's in line with the Stoic concept of cosmopolitanism, in which we are deeply interconnected with the lives of others.

DIVINE SIGNS

- Epictetus additionally tells us to look for what he calls divine signs. Under special circumstances, he believed that we get a personal call from the universe.*
- In modern terms, we can agree that there are exceptional individuals who feel compelled for whatever reasons to live unconventional lives, wherein they follow their own paths regardless of social conventions and expectations. But within Stoic philosophy, this is acceptable only if the path is ethical. The flamboyant artist who leaves his family and children to pursue his art in an exotic locale is not necessarily doing so in an ethical fashion.

SOCRATES AS A ROLE MODEL

- What happens when two or more of the roles we play happen to conflict? Epictetus tackles the issue by examining Socrates as a Stoic role model.
- He begins by telling us that human beings are members of two cities: one large city that comprises humanity at large and another specific city or nation—such as Athens, Rome, or New York—in which we were born or live.
- Epictetus continues to say that our place “is assigned from the arrangement of the whole, and the whole is more sovereign than the part.” Imagine you are the foot of a body, and the body needs to cross a muddy path in order to get home. As a foot, it is up to you to step into the mud, which is obviously not pleasant. But you’ll do it, and gladly, because you are helping the whole body, and ultimately yourself.

* According to legend, Socrates, Diogenes, and Zeno each received instructions from an oracle.

- The same relation exists between us as individuals and the society we live in. If we do something good for the whole, we also simultaneously do something good for ourselves. That is the profession of a citizen.
- Socrates was famously tried and convicted of morally corrupting the Athenian youth because he was teaching them to question the authority of their elders. At a famous trial, he defended himself on the ground that he had a higher duty to help people, regardless of the consequences.
- Socrates, according to Epictetus, was cognizant of being a citizen of the cosmos, and he was rightly concerned only with his own faculty of judgment rather than with what was not under his control—the judge’s decisions and actions. The judge faces his own “danger,” Epictetus tells us, meaning he may misuse his faculty of reason and arrive at the wrong judgment, which is bad first and foremost for him, because it undermines his own character.
- But Socrates was also a particular human being: a citizen of Athens, husband, father, and friend—roles that imposed additional duties and constraints on him. And Epictetus suggests that Socrates’s consciously chosen role as a gadfly in Athenian society was in tension with his other roles. Nevertheless, Socrates was the sort of exceptional man who would pursue a moral life regardless of his duties to others.
- True, most of us will not rise to the level of Socrates. And Epictetus acknowledged that Socrates was special in his life’s mission. But countless everyday occasions afford us the opportunity to rise above our immediate concerns and do the right thing for humanity at large. In this way, we share in Socrates’s spirit.

We can emulate Socrates’s spirit by welcoming refugees from war-torn countries, even at some cost to our own welfare, or voting for politicians to implement policies that will lessen our impact on the environment, even if this means less comfort for us and our families.

EXAMPLES OF CONFLICTING ROLES

- Epictetus then provides us with two examples of role ethics in cases of conflicting roles in our lives.

- In the first example, Epictetus examines the circumstances of two slaves who are tasked with holding their master's chamber pot. One obliges, and the other refuses. The first one is playing the straightforward role of a slave. The latter seems to choose his more fundamental role as a human being, and the dignity that comes with it, ahead of the role of slave.
- The way any given conflict gets resolved hinges on one's assessment of his or her own character, which, in this case, leads to the choice of whether to accept or refuse to hold the chamber pot. It's a matter of what a person thinks is reasonable for them to do, according to their own standards.
- As Brian Johnson, an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University, puts it: "It is up to our own initiative for each of us to introspect and identify what our own self-worth is since that is the operative and necessary capacity in these two conflicting roles."
- The second example of role ethics from Epictetus concerns a mythical conflict between the role of father and that of commander of an army. According to legend, the Greek king Agamemnon was faced with the impossible choice of sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia or being unable to sail with his fleet for Troy.
- In the version of events recounted by the Athenian tragedian Euripides, Agamemnon's brother Menelaus pushed through a solution by convincing Agamemnon to follow the advice of the seer Calchas and sacrifice Iphigenia.
- According to Johnson, in some difficult situations, we cannot decide by ourselves, so we go "meta": We listen to external advice. In this case, Agamemnon ended up doing what his brother suggested, as horrible as that decision sounds to us today.
- The way Epictetus puts it is that we should try to understand the dictates of God (that is, nature). Our human faculty of judgment allows us to correctly interpret what God suggests. And this comes from practicing the cardinal virtue of practical wisdom, which is achieved through self-reflection and mindfulness as well as from comparing our own ideas to those endorsed by our role models and peers. Doing this allows us to arrive at better judgments and to make moral progress.

CONCLUSION

- Epictetus concludes his treatment of role ethics by deploying a military metaphor for life. He says:

Do you not know that the business of life is [like] a [military] campaign? It is necessary for one to mount guard, another go out on reconnaissance, and another out to fight. It is not possible for all to stay in the same place, nor is it better so.

- The idea is that if we don't stick with our roles—both chosen and assigned by life—there will be chaos, just as would happen in an army where everyone is trying to do everything and nobody has specific duties.
- Of course, Epictetus acknowledges that we shouldn't be rigid, and we might switch roles according to what the circumstances require, but we simply cannot perform them all at once.
- In our own lives, let us be cognizant of the various roles we play and strive to play them at our best, while at the same time acknowledging that there will be conflicts and that we cannot do everything. Stoicism is, ultimately, a very self-forgiving philosophy. Just do your best, and the rest will follow.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Johnson, *The Role Ethics of Epictetus*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What is role ethics?

Answer on page 184



MISUSING AND MISUNDERSTANDING STOICISM

Stoicism is popular today because good ideas endure, especially when they have practical applications in daily life. And the all-pervasive influence of social media has made it possible for people to get acquainted with the philosophy and form local and global groups devoted to its practice. But with Stoicism's renewed popularity, countless opportunities arise for the misunderstanding and misuse of its precepts. This lesson looks at some of the common misconceptions about Stoicism and how they diverge from the philosophy's origins and intent.

ENDURANCE AND EMOTIONS

- The most common misconception about Stoicism is that its practitioners march through life with a stiff upper lip, suppressing their emotions and enduring adversity. Like many caricatures, there is a grain of truth to this. But a cartoon tells us only so much, leaving us otherwise ignorant.
- Endurance is indeed a Stoic value. It derives from an understanding of what Stoics refer to as the dichotomy of control. Everything that Epictetus says is in our power comes down to conscious thoughts and deliberations. Everything else—including health, reputation, career, and wealth—is not within our direct control.
- This means sometimes things will go our way, and other times they won't, despite our best efforts. In the latter case, the Stoic attitude is endurance because complaining about things we cannot change only makes them worse.

- Moreover, the Stoics do not seek to suppress emotions. In his collected teachings known as *The Enchiridion*, Epictetus says:

So make a practice at once of saying to every strong impression: “An impression is all you are, not the source of the impression.” Then test and assess it with your criteria, but one primarily: ask, “Is this something that is, or is not, in my control?”

- An impression is typically our first reaction to a situation or event. For instance, if someone insults you, your impression is that you should be angry because that’s the accepted response to an insult. So, in Stoicism, our impressions are a combination of emotional reactions (like anger) and implied cognitive judgments (such as “I ought to be angry because I’ve been insulted”).
- What Epictetus is saying, then, is that you should challenge your impression by unpacking it and questioning it. Only after doing this can you be in a position to reasonably decide whether to assent—that is, agree—to the initial impression or not.
- In the case of an insult, you shouldn’t give in to the temptation to assent, because insults can’t hurt you unless you let them. And one sure way to let them hurt you is to get angry. Therefore, you should train yourself to deny assent to such an impression whenever it presents itself.

Stoic psychology does not artificially separate reason and emotions. They’re all a bundle of mental processes, inextricably intertwined with each other.

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF EMOTIONS

- Modern scientists have a good understanding of the neuroscience of emotions, and the general picture confirms the intuitions of the ancient Stoics.

- To begin, there is a crucial distinction between an emotion in the neuroscientific sense of a particular nonconscious process underpinned by specific neural structures and the psychological, conscious state of experiencing it. This is pretty much the Stoic distinction between impressions and assent.
- And this applies to all emotions, not just anger. When scientists talk about fear, they refer to two distinct though interrelated phenomena. On the one hand, there is the evolved, and presumably adaptive, nonconscious emotion that underpins the classical fight-or-flight response when we are in a dangerous situation. The neural machinery that makes this possible is located in a region of the brain known as the amygdala.
- On the other hand, there is the mature emotion—sometimes referred to as feeling—consisting not just of the raw bit and its corresponding physiological reaction but also of a cognitive component: “I am afraid because there is a tiger loose in the street, and that seems dangerous, so being afraid is appropriate.”
- It’s important not to confuse basic emotions and mature feelings. The latter are better understood as cognitively assembled conscious states, which means that they are the result of an active, conscious, construction of the human mind. This construction takes place out of a number of building blocks, only one of which is the nonconscious, amygdala-based threat-detection and reaction mechanism.
- The other components are derived by understanding the context in which we experience the reaction as well as our past judgments in similar situations.

CATEGORIES OF EMOTIONS

- The Stoics recognized three categories of emotions: pre-emotions, unhealthy or disruptive emotions, and healthy or constructive emotions. Pre-emotions are the nonconscious ones. The fully fledged emotions are divided into unhealthy and healthy emotions, and we’re counseled to train ourselves to move away from the first group and to actively cultivate the second one.

- One way to understand the Stoic classification of emotions is to appreciate that an emotion can be generated by the thought of something good or bad happening either now or in the future. There are, then, four fundamental types of unhealthy emotions: present good, future good, present bad, and future bad.
 - Present good: pleasure (in the unhealthy sense)—when we experience an impulse toward something that we consider to be good but really isn't good. For instance, having sex with a stranger while at the same time carrying on a committed relationship with someone else.
 - Future good: appetite (meaning craving something)—an impulse toward something in the future that we consider good but that really isn't good. For instance, planning to eat junk food while watching bad television.
 - Present bad: distress—an impulse away from something we consider bad but which really isn't bad. For instance, being on a dentist's chair during a regular teeth cleaning.
 - Future bad: fear—an impulse away from something in the future that we consider bad but that really isn't bad. For instance, according to the Stoics, death.
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- In mirror fashion, there are corresponding emotions that the Stoics consider good: present good, future good, and future bad.
 - Present good: joy—an impulse toward something present now that we consider good and is good. For instance, the joy we feel in the presence of a friend or loved one.
 - Future good: wishing—an impulse toward some future thing that we regard as good and that is good. For instance, we wish to keep enjoying our friends and loved ones.
 - Future bad: caution—an impulse away from some future thing that we regard as bad and that is bad. For instance, we don't want to do anything unethical or of which we would be ashamed.

- You might have noticed that there is no positive emotional category for the combination of bad and present. For the Stoics, the only present thing that could be truly bad for us is our own bad judgment. And that is under our control, so we don't need to experience such a scenario.
- The idea is that our emotional responses—not the instinctive part but the mature cognitive judgments—are under our control. And so are the actions we undertake in response to such judgments. So, while it is correct to say that we are not in charge of our unconscious emotions, we certainly can rebuff our mature unhealthy emotions and actively cultivate our healthy ones.

PATHETIC SYLLOGISM

- We challenge the cognitive judgments underlying our emotional responses through something called the pathetic syllogism. The word *pathetic* in this context doesn't have the modern English meaning of "miserably inadequate." Instead, it refers to the Greek word *apatheia*, meaning lack of passions, wherein passions are unhealthy emotions such as fear, anger, and hatred.
- So, the pathetic syllogism is a particular piece of deductive reasoning having to do with the unhealthy emotions. Stoics train themselves to use such thinking every time they experience those unhealthy emotions. For example,
 - Premise 1: Losing money in the stock market is an evil.
 - Premise 2: If an evil is present, it is appropriate for me to feel distress.
 - Premise 3: I just lost money in the stock market.
 - Conclusion: It's appropriate for me to feel distress at my financial loss.
- The Stoics used two strategies to challenge the pathetic syllogism. Notice first of all that the third premise is just a plain fact: You have lost money in the stock market. We can't argue with facts, despite how often people seem inclined to do so.

- One strategy, then, is to attack the first premise by denying that losing money in the stock market is an evil. For the Stoics, money is a preferred indifferent, not a true good. So, this challenge might be successful if you agree with Stoic principles.
- Another strategy is to attack the second premise of the pathetic syllogism, denying that it's appropriate (on this particular occasion) to feel distress at the loss of money in the stock market. Think of it this way: We're adult human beings who understand that playing the market is like gambling. Sometimes we win, and sometimes we lose. So, we shouldn't throw a tantrum every time something doesn't go our way.
- Stoics study logic because they want to sharpen their ability to correctly analyze whatever situation they find themselves in, with the goal of responding appropriately—that is, in accordance with reason.

STOIC BILLIONAIRES

- Another misconception about Stoicism is that it's a method to make you rich or famous. Wealth is a preferred indifferent, meaning it's morally neutral, in the sense that it doesn't make us better (or worse) human beings. Seneca warned against accumulating wealth because it inevitably tempts us into unvirtuous behavior.
- Stoicism these days is popular among highly paid tech entrepreneurs, coaches of Super Bowl-winning football teams, and assorted other celebrities. Consider this headline from *Business Insider*: "7 ways billionaires like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates demonstrate the ancient philosophy of Marcus Aurelius."
- The first billionaire on the list is said to embody Stoicism because he is a voracious reader. This actually is exactly the opposite of what Seneca counseled his friend Lucilius. He warned:

Be careful . . . lest this reading of many authors and books of every sort may tend to make you discursive and unsteady. You must linger among a limited number of master thinkers, and digest their works, if you would derive ideas which shall win firm hold in your mind. Everywhere means nowhere.

- The second billionaire says that “it’s important to not waste time with people who aren’t resourceful.” This does sound like Epictetus, when he says: “Above all, keep a close watch on this—that you are never so tied to your former acquaintances and friends that you are pulled down to their level.” But Epictetus is talking about moral improvement, while the billionaire is talking about people he can use for his own gain.
- The third billionaire tells us, “Ten minutes, once gone, are gone for good. Divide your life into 10-minute units and sacrifice as few of them as possible in meaningless activity.”
- This does sound Stoic on the surface. Seneca said, “We’re tightfisted with property and money, yet think too little of wasting time, the one thing about which we should all be the toughest misers.” The problem is that Seneca very clearly was talking about all the time we waste focusing on things other than improving our character and learning how to do right by our fellow human beings. He wasn’t talking about increasing efficiency to rack up a billion dollars.
- The fourth billionaire approaches life by always questioning himself so that he can continue to improve. But he states this in the context of explaining what makes for a good entrepreneur, not a good human being. So, his goal is not the same as that of Stoic practitioners.
- Our fifth example is a famous sports coach who is said to have won many titles “with a Stoic approach to both success and failure.” This conclusion is arrived at by drawing a parallel from the coach’s on-field accomplishments to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius’s admonition to “keep a sturdy mind on the task at hand, … doing it with strict and simple dignity, affection, freedom, and justice—giving yourself a break from all other considerations.”
- But while Marcus dealt with incredible daily stress as an emperor, his goal throughout was to be a good human being, not just to win a trophy in an athletic competition. Sure, you might take Marcus’s approach to become rich or to win the Super Bowl, but that doesn’t make you a Stoic.

- The sixth billionaire says, “Once we realize that imperfect understanding is the human condition, there is no shame in being wrong, only in failing to correct our mistakes.” Similarly, Epictetus says:

If you are defeated once and tell yourself you will overcome, but carry on as before, know in the end you’ll be so ill and weakened that eventually you won’t even notice your mistake and will begin to rationalize your behavior.

- But the billionaire is talking about correcting mistakes in business. Epictetus is referring to correcting your mistakes as a human who wants to achieve moral excellence. The two are not incompatible, of course. One can be a successful businessperson as well as an ethical human being. But realizing the first does not guarantee the second.
- Finally, the seventh billionaire—one of the richest people on the planet—says his favorite restaurant is McDonald’s. While minimalism with regard to material possessions is in synch with Stoic philosophy, the idea is not to pursue minimalism for its own sake, or to show off, but because it frees us to focus on our efforts to improve morally.

STOICISM AND GENDER

- Contrary to what a good number of people seem to think, Stoicism is not a manly thing. It is equally open and useful to people of all genders.
- A typical argument for the manliness of Stoicism goes like this: If Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Epictetus were asked their goal in life, they would say to live with virtue. *Vir* is Latin for “man,” so the word *virtue* finds its roots in the Latin word for manliness: *virtus*.
- But there are two fatal flaws with this argument. First, even if the etymological analysis were correct, modern Stoics are not bound by the specific cultural practices of the ancient Greco-Romans, which reserved to men a central place on society and politics.
- Second, “virtue” is the modern translation not of *vir*, but of the Greek *arete*, which does not mean “man” or “manly” but simply refers to excellence, in gender-neutral fashion. The Stoics wished to be the best human beings they could be. Nothing else.

- The broader problem with this misconception is that it neglects several fundamental tenets of Stoicism while distorting others beyond recognition. These are people who tend to focus on the Stoic virtue of courage without mentioning its twin, justice.
- To the Stoics, there is no such quality as being courageous but unjust. Instead, justice is an expression of social equity that applies to all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or political opinion.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life*.

QUESTION

- ↗ Stoics are often thought of as having stiff upper lips, going through life while attempting to suppress their emotions. Why is this stereotype wrong?

Answer on page 184



STOICISM FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

This lesson explores the experience of the course's presenter, Massimo Pigliucci, with Stoicism and compares the philosophy with Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism using examples from Massimo's colleagues.

EASTERN PHILOSOPHIES

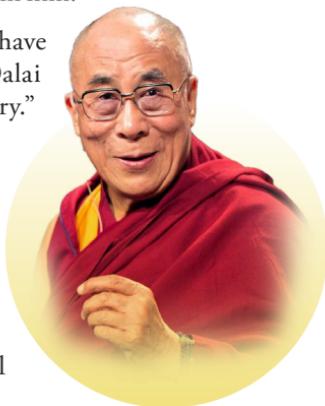
- Stoicism emerged in the Hellenistic world together with several other classical Western philosophies as a way for people to cope with abrupt social and political change. Analogously, forces of change also led to the birth of the three great Eastern philosophies that bear more than a passing similarity to Stoicism.
- Buddhism originated in India in the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, during the period known as the second urbanization. It was a time of profound transformation of Indian society.
- Confucianism was born in China around the 6th century BCE, as different potentates vied with each other and vigorously pursued competing economic, political, and military ambitions.
- A loss of faith in the traditional religion created an opening for new ways of thinking.* One such school was Daoism. Daoism's founder, the philosopher and writer Laozi, is said to have grown weary of moral decay in Henan province. The kingdom was in political and moral decline, and a new framework to live was welcomed.
- More important than any historical or cultural similarities is the convergence of these four philosophies—Stoicism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—in terms of their ethics, or how they propose we should live our lives.

* This period of Chinese history is referred to as the hundred schools of thought.

BUDDHISM

- Tibetan Buddhists believe that anger, resentment, and associated emotions are categorically bad. This is precisely the Stoic position, as articulated by Seneca in his essay *On Anger*.
- Owen Flanagan, a Professor of Philosophy at Duke University and an expert practitioner of Buddhism, recounts being puzzled by the Buddhist claim that not only is it desirable to live a life without anger, but it's even possible! So, he once asked the Dalai Lama a question that he thought might cast such an approach in doubt.
- The question was: If I have a chance to go back in time and kill Adolf Hitler before he starts World War II and the Holocaust, shouldn't I do it? Wouldn't it be OK to be angry at the thought of what Hitler was going to do and use such anger as motivation to kill him?
- The Dalai Lama's response could just as well have come from Seneca. According to Owen, the Dalai Lama responded, "Yes, kill him. But don't be angry." He continued:

The thought is that Hitler is an unfortunate node in the way the world is unfolding. He did not choose to be the evil person he is. He deserves compassion, not anger. And he must die for reasons of compassion: compassion for him and all those who might suffer his awfulness.



- For Buddhists, the point is to reduce suffering (*dukkha*). And anger squarely gets in the way of that goal. Worse, anger is a source of suffering, not a solution to the problem.
- While Stoicism's main goal is a life of virtue, in which we strive to become the best human beings we can be, the philosophy also aims at eliminating suffering, particularly that which comes from attachment to external things instead of a focus on virtue.

- Being compassionate is not directly analogous to the Stoic take on virtue, but the differences might be superficial. Stoic cosmopolitanism amounts to a concern for all of humanity. As Stoics, we have a duty, rooted in the cardinal virtues of justice and courage, to relieve the suffering of our fellow human beings insofar as that is possible.

CONFUCIANISM

- Also intriguing are the similarities between Stoicism and Confucianism. Confucian practitioner and professor Bryan Van Norden says the cardinal point of Confucian philosophy is to develop loving relationships with others, beginning with the family. We should also strive to take care of others, including strangers.
- This resonates with the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis*—the notion that we should appropriate, so to speak, the concerns of others. Stoics, too, see the family as the natural place to learn the rudiments of ethics.
- Confucianism maintains that we are defined relationally, by the way we handle our various roles. This implies that there's no sharp distinction in Confucianism between self-interest and concern for others. Performing these roles well helps other people and ourselves as well. Here again is a strong concordance with Stoicism, and particularly the concept of role ethics.
- Confucianism, like Stoicism, urges us to practice a set of virtues. In Stoicism, the four cardinal virtues are practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. And they are highly interdependent—basically four aspects of the same underlying virtue of wisdom.
- Confucians, by contrast, rank their virtues according to scope and importance. The two most crucial virtues in Confucianism are benevolence—having compassion for others—and righteousness—preserving our moral integrity and disdaining what is ethically shameful.

- The third Confucian virtue is wisdom, which helps us decide the best course of action when navigating ethically complex situations. The fourth virtue is propriety: respect of etiquette and the like. It's thought less important than the other three virtues, though respecting social customs is a key to peaceful living.
- Finally, Confucians think that human beings are naturally pro-social (or virtuous)—though to an imperfect degree—and that we can perfect our virtue through reflection and practice. Stoics, too, learn from their association with others, both in positive and negative lights.

There is little, if any, hint that the Stoics cared much about local customs. In fact, Stoics sometimes openly flaunted convention.

DAOISM

- For a partial understanding of Daoism, this course's presenter is indebted to Daoist practitioner Robin Wang, a Professor of Philosophy at Loyola Marymount University.
- A first point of similarity between Daoism and Stoicism is that both philosophies concern themselves with how to handle uncertainty, and particularly things that are out of our control. The 4th-century BCE Daoist sage, Zhuangzi, said, “Resign yourself to what cannot be avoided and nourish what is within you—this is the best.”
- The idea is to focus on what's most important and what's within our control, such as our abilities, desires, plans, and daily routines. That sounds a lot like the Stoic dichotomy of control.
- Daoism teaches the art of flowing naturally with situations and conditions. Robin relates a famous story in Daoist lore about how the legendary character Dayu managed a flood.
- Instead of using force, like putting up dikes to stop the water, he redirected the flood by dredging new channels to allow the river to follow its natural flow. These channels served as outlets for the torrential waters and as irrigation conduits to distant farmlands.

- We find something similar from Marcus Aurelius:

Our actions may be impeded ... but there can be no impeding our intentions or our dispositions. Because we can accommodate and adapt. The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.

- Another interesting aspect of Daoism is its embrace of change. Uncertainty is continuous and shaped by change. In turn, change can bring out many unexpected things. The Daoist way teaches us to experience joy in good and bad days by engaging in bodily movement and maintaining an organic lifestyle. The Stoics, too, thought that change is a natural and inevitable aspect of the world, and we should not resist but instead embrace it.

STOICISM TODAY

- All of these comparisons hint at the possibility that different traditions converge into similar approaches to the problem they are all attempting to address: how to live a good life. So, let's see what it might mean to be a Stoic in the 21st century, using the course's presenter, Massimo Pigliucci, as an example.
- Massimo has a set of spiritual exercises that he performs on a regular basis in pursuit of the ultimate Stoic goal to become a better person. One practice is to ask himself, before he does anything, which parts of the task are under his control and which are not. He then tries to focus on what he can control.
- On at least a weekly basis, he engages in mild exercises of self-imposed hardship, such as fasting for a day or taking a walk in the cold without being properly dressed. This isn't a masochist practice. As the Stoic Musonius Rufus says, we do well to remind ourselves that we can endure without certain commodities. And we need to be thankful for what we have and often take for granted.

- Another exercise is meant to counter the constant pressure and consequent temptation we face to buy things we don't need. From time to time, Massimo selects a whole week during which he doesn't buy anything other than the basic necessities. The idea comes from Socrates, as told by Diogenes Laërtius in his book *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. He wrote: "Often when [Socrates] looked at the multitude of wares exposed for sale, he would say to himself, 'How many things I can do without!'"
- Another useful mental exercise Massimo adapted from Epictetus consists of never leaving home without reminding himself that he has two objectives in mind: to do whatever he's setting out to do and to keep in harmony with himself and his fellow human beings.
- Perhaps the most important of his Stoic practices is the evening philosophical diary: a way to reflect on what he's done well, or not so well, and to learn from his experience.
- Taken as a whole, these exercises might seem taxing. But it doesn't all have to be done at the same time. And different people will find different ways to practice Stoicism. The important thing is to practice each day for the rest of your life.
- The goal is to keep enjoying everything that life has to offer while becoming more mindful that we are defined by our relations to other human beings. It's the cultivation of these human relationships over time that makes life worth living.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- ↗ Pigliucci, *How to Be a Stoic*.

QUESTION

- ↗ What does Stoicism have in common with philosophical or religious traditions like Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism?

Answer on page 185



FOUR FAMILY PROBLEMS AND STOIC SOLUTIONS

This lesson presents four examples of personal crises in contemporary life to show that Stoicism can be helpful in guiding modern thoughts and practices.

BETH

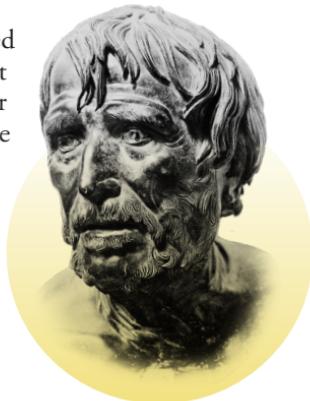
- In the first scenario, Beth and her 37-year-old adult son moved in together after he suffered a series of strokes. She has accumulated some financial savings, and rather than rent, the two of them want to purchase a home in the near future.
- One obstacle is that Beth's three other children are divided over her serving as caretaker. In particular, one sibling believes that his brother's life choices are responsible for his condition.
- Beth would like to restore peace in the family, but she has been unable to. She says, "My attempts to mediate fall flat because I'm the mother." Beth says she would like to mend her "disjointed tribe" and gain control over her anxieties.
- The problem is that Beth wants something that is outside of her control, and that generates frustration and anxiety. The Stoic concept of the dichotomy of control applies here. To want to bring together her disjointed tribe is a laudable goal, but accomplishing it depends on the entrenched opinions of four other people.
- Beth, then, should shift her goal. She should try her best to persuade her children, even at the cost of potentially displeasing some of them. But she shouldn't expect to necessarily succeed. If she does, great! If she doesn't, though, she can derive peace of mind from the fact that she tried her best to do the right thing.

- Controlling her anxieties is doable because they are internally generated. It might be that Stoic journaling would help. This is a technique in which you take a few minutes every night to write down your thoughts and reactions to the events of the day.
- Beth should write in an analytic, not emotional, manner. She can also write in the second person, as if she were giving counsel to a friend. This will help her get some emotional distance from events, allowing her to think more clearly about what to do.

MICHAEL

- The second scenario involves a home-maintenance mishap that led to decision-making paralysis. After identifying a small leak in his bedroom, Michael called a plumber. The solution was to shut off water to about 20 condo units. Michael informed his neighbors that they should not use their water until the problem was taken care of.
- The plumber opened up a section of wall in his bedroom and cut into the PVC pipe, which he intended to replace. But the repair couldn't be completed until the next day. The following morning, Michael awoke to a spray of cold water on his face. The wall had become a geyser. Someone had gotten into the building's maintenance shed and turned the water back on.
- It was "absolute chaos," Michael says. He called 911 and the plumber, and he went out to the maintenance shed to turn off the water. But by this time, his living quarters were completely flooded. There was damage to the ceiling, wall, and floor as well as the moving boxes that contained his personal belongings.
- In another incident a couple of years earlier, Michael had installed a Murphy bed in his bedroom, inadvertently drilling through a protective metal plate into a water main. It began leaking when he disassembled the bed, removing the screw.
- Although the mishap was fairly routine, he says he beat himself up over the mistake. And what was a manageable problem grew in magnitude. He's gone from being "very comfortable, and feeling like [he was] in control, to out of control in 24 hours."

- Michael is now living with a brother and trying to figure out when he'll feel confident to act. What he wants is to gain the confidence to manage his anxiety about the unknown and to become decisive again.
- The problem is that Michael needs to let go of the idea that he can control the unknown. His own experience should teach him that's simply not going to happen. You can't prevent accidents, and you can't know what you might miss. The sooner you let go of that idea, the sooner you'll regain your self-confidence. Self-confidence should be based on your ability to deal with situations (which is possible), not to predict them (which is impossible).
- Seneca reminds us that we ought to be prepared for anything that happens—not in the sense that we can actually predict it or preempt it, but rather that we should train ourselves to be ready to face whatever circumstances life throws at us.
- By all means, make a willful decision to make the next move. Consider it carefully, doing your best to anticipate different outcomes. But think of yourself as an archer and repeat to yourself constantly: I am aiming to hit this target, but I know that a gust of wind could ruin the best shot.



MONICA AND PETER

- Our third scenario concerns dysfunctional parents tormenting a married couple.
- As a girl, Monica's parents told her she could do anything. Her father took her fishing. She played baseball until switching to softball. She had her pick of universities. But freedom lasted only until she graduated from college and married. Now, Monica feels her parents expect her to take off five years from her career to become a mother. She's also expected to be the homemaker, "when," she says, "my husband, who has a PhD, is extremely capable of doing what I do."
- The young husband, Peter, grew up with a mother who was manipulative and controlling. She once threatened to take away his dog, and she asked why he couldn't be like the children she saw on her favorite TV soap opera. After Peter married, she complained that she was losing her son.

- Both Monica and Peter struggle as adults to manage their relationships with parents who are now in their 60s. The family dynamics are compounded by differences in generational values and politics. Monica asks, “How can we better manage our relationships with our parents? And if we can’t, how can I control the anxiety I feel over their contradictions and demands?”
- One student of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus apparently faced a similar problem. The student complained, “My brother is unfair to me.” Epictetus responded, “Well then, keep up your side of the relationship; don’t concern yourself with his behavior, only with what you must do to keep your will in tune with nature.”
- What Monica and Peter’s parents do is up to them; they control only their part of the relationship. And even though their parents might be controlling or hypocritical, Monica and Peter still have a duty to do their best by their parents as part of their social role.
- Monica and Peter can maintain inner harmony by repeating to themselves that they are doing their best by their parents. They should strive to be loving and understanding but firm on the fact that their life’s decisions are not up to the parents.

NATALIA AND GREG

- The last scenario is about a father’s terminal illness putting a young couple’s future on hold.
- Natalia and Greg were in their 20s and getting ready to launch their life together when Greg’s father was diagnosed as terminally ill. Greg gave up school and work, putting his future on hold for his father—who, according to Natalia, would not have extended that same consideration to his son. Other family members recognized Greg’s sacrifice while doing little or nothing to help him.
- Natalia says that Greg has been crushed by the responsibility. At the same time, she feels that her needs are now secondary. She says she’s cried and done “a lot of angry journaling.”
- She asks, “How can I move forward and not hold onto anger? And can I find ways to help Greg advocate for himself?”

- Getting angry doesn't help—in fact, it makes things worse. As Seneca puts it:

Anger [is] a short madness: for it is equally devoid of self-control, regardless of decorum, forgetful of kinship, obstinately engrossed in whatever it begins to do, deaf to reason and advice, excited by trifling causes, awkward at perceiving what is true and just, and very like a falling rock which breaks itself to pieces upon the very thing which it crushes.

- Angry journaling is not only ineffective but counterproductive. Natalia should try instead analytical journaling: write as calmly as she can about the situation, mindfully trying to understand other people's views and charting a way forward. It helps to write in the second person, as if addressing a friend, to gain some emotional distance from what's happening.
- Natalia should set aside thoughts along the lines of "his father wouldn't have done it for him," as they don't matter. What matters is how Greg has decided to act toward his father. It also doesn't matter if Greg's family does little to help. Again, what matters is what he is doing.
- What's up to Natalia here is to be supportive and understanding of Greg's virtuous act and at the same time carve whatever space for her new family is possible under these circumstances. As the emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius says, if you reflect properly, an obstacle becomes a new way forward.
- It is not correct that Natalia doesn't have any control over the situation. As Epictetus reminds us, you do control your judgments and decisions. You just don't control the outcomes. So, for instance, Natalia can try to talk to Greg about his plans. How does he imagine they'll keep handling the situation? For how long? What is he suggesting to eventually make up for the lost time?
- Natalia can engage Greg in a kind and constructive conversation, reminding him that they also have needs as a couple. They can be postponed but not ignored.

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QUESTION ANSWERS

LESSON 1:

What do the Stoics mean by the phrase “live according to nature”?

Answer: To live in accordance with nature means to take seriously the two fundamental characteristics of human nature: our ability to reason and our high degree of sociality.

LESSON 2:

What ideas from Stoicism were incorporated into Christianity?

Answer: Christians borrowed from Stoicism the idea of logos, or “word,” which they associated with God. For the Stoics, the logos is the rational principle that animates the universe. Both Paul of Tarsus and Thomas Aquinas also incorporated the four cardinal Stoic virtues—practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance—into the full set of seven Christian virtues (which include hope, faith, and charity).

LESSON 3:

Why is logic a part of the Stoic curriculum, and what did the Stoics mean by that term?

Answer: Logic had a much broader meaning than it does today, essentially encompassing everything to do with sound human reasoning, including epistemology, rhetoric, and what today we call cognitive science. Logic was important because without good reasoning, we risk mis-living our lives.

LESSON 4:

Why is physics part of the Stoic curriculum, and what did the Stoics mean by that term?

Answer: *Physics* derives from the Greek word for nature, and in antiquity it encompassed what we refer to as the natural sciences as well as metaphysics. The idea was that in order to live a good life, we ought to understand how the world works.

LESSON 5:

What did the Stoics mean by *ethics*?

Answer: While ethics today is largely confined to the study of right and wrong actions, for the Greco-Romans it was the study of how to live our lives. Accordingly, it was the most important aspect of the Stoic curriculum, informed by both logic and physics.

LESSON 6:

What is the discipline of desire?

Answer: One of the three disciplines of Stoic practice articulated by Epictetus. It aims to reorient our priorities in life, or desires, away from material possessions or fame and toward better judgment and better character—the things the Stoics thought really matter.

LESSON 7:

What is the discipline of action?

Answer: One of the three disciplines of Stoic practice articulated by Epictetus. It aims to teach us fair and just ways to deal with other people.

LESSON 8:

What is the discipline of assent?

Answer: One of the three disciplines of Stoic practice articulated by Epictetus. It aims at sharpening our judgment through the use of reason.

LESSON 9:

In the letters to Lucilius, what is Seneca's take on how to best use our time?

Answer: Because life is finite—and, moreover, we do not know when it will be over—we need to live with urgency, not wasting time with things that are not important to us or useful to the human cosmopolis.

LESSON 10:

Why does Seneca say that anger is “temporary madness”?

Answer: Anger is one of the unhealthy emotions, along with fear, hatred, and others. When we are angry, the emotion overcomes reason, and we act irrationally. While there may be good reasons to feel anger—for instance, in response to an injustice—it is never a good idea to act while angry.

LESSON 11:

What is Seneca's take on grief in his letters of consolation?

Answer: Grief is a natural human emotion, but we need to be careful in not indulging it, or it becomes self-perpetuating and gets in the way of our duties to ourselves and to others.

LESSON 12:

What is the dichotomy of control, also known as the Stoic fork?

Answer: It is a basic principle of Stoic action, articulated in detail by Epictetus, who said that some things are up to us (our judgments, endorsed values, and decisions to act or not to act), while other things are not up to us, though we can influence them (health, wealth, and reputation). It follows that we should focus on where we can actually exercise our agency and develop an attitude of equanimity toward things we do not control.

LESSON 13:

What is Epictetus's take on the consequences of unethical actions?

Answer: Whenever we are unfaithful or untrustworthy, we undermine our own character and reputation—the most precious things we have in life, since how others regard us depends on them.

LESSON 14:

According to Epictetus, how should we behave when we are sick and in pain?

Answer: Being sick and in pain is part of life, and it needs to be approached the same way we approach everything: with courage and justice. If we are sick, we bear our sickness, and we do not become angry or disrespectful to others, particularly our caretakers.

LESSON 15:

Epictetus says that the only true evil is ignorance. What does that mean?

Answer: *Ignorance*, in this context, is not to be understood as lack of formal education, but more precisely as lack of wisdom. People do bad things not because they want to be bad but because they are mistaken about what constitutes being good. And it is incumbent on the rest of us, if possible, to teach them.

LESSON 16:

Epictetus says that whenever we set out to do something, we should actually keep two goals, not one, in mind. What are those?

Answer: We should of course attempt to accomplish whatever we set out to accomplish, but we should also keep in harmony with ourselves and other people. So, for instance, if you go to the movies and someone interferes with your enjoyment of the show by turning on their mobile device, you should try to persuade them to turn it off, but without anger. After all, you had two goals: to enjoy the movie and to keep in harmony with yourself and your fellow human beings. You may fail in the first goal because it is not entirely up to you, but you are certain to succeed at the second goal if you really want to.

LESSON 17:

Why does Marcus Aurelius begin his *Meditations* with an entire chapter in which the emperor thanks people who influenced him?

Answer: Thankfulness is a crucial aspect of Stoic practice. We ought to recognize that we are who we are in part because of the good influence that other people have had on us throughout our lives.

LESSON 18:

Marcus Aurelius reminds himself in the morning that he will probably encounter ungrateful and unjust people. How is he supposed to react to that?

Answer: That some people are ungrateful or unjust is a fact of life we must accept. But we also have to remind ourselves that other people's unethical deeds cannot touch us because we are capable of making our own decisions about what is right and what is wrong. Moreover, we should remember that we, too, do bad things from time to time, so we ought to be compassionate toward people who make mistakes.

LESSON 19:

What is the ruling faculty?

Answer: The ruling faculty is our ability to arrive at reasoned judgments. It is the most precious faculty for a human being because everything we do in life depends on its exercise.

LESSON 20:

Musonius Rufus says that the best exercise of the virtue of temperance is at the dinner table. Why?

Answer: Temperance is one of the four cardinal virtues, together with practical wisdom, courage, and justice. Every time we sit down for a meal, we have an occasion to practice temperance. We can focus on eating neither too much nor too little, drinking in right measure, waiting for others to take their turn with the food, and sharing our meals with friends and family.

LESSON 21:

Why do Stoics think we should consciously adopt role models in life?

Answer: We should adopt role models because we are not the best judges of whether we're making progress. As Seneca puts it, in order to be able to tell if something is crooked, you need a straight ruler to use as comparison.

LESSON 22:

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LESSON 23:

What is role ethics?

Answer: An approach developed primarily by Epictetus, role ethics recognizes that we simultaneously play a number of roles in life. Some of these roles are the result of circumstances, like being someone's son or daughter; other roles we choose, such as being a friend or partner. Then there is the most fundamental role we all share: that of a human being, a member of the planetary human family referred to by Stoics as the cosmopolis. The trick is to handle our roles in the best fashion possible, mindful of the possibility of conflicts and trade-offs among roles.

LESSON 24:

Stoics are often thought of as having stiff upper lips, going through life while attempting to suppress their emotions. Why is this stereotype wrong?

Answer: Stoic practitioners train themselves to endure things in life that they cannot affect, but that doesn't mean they don't also enjoy the good things that life brings. Stoics also distinguish between unhealthy emotions (like fear, anger, and hatred) and healthy ones (like love, joy, and a sense of justice). They strive to move away from the first group while at the same time mindfully cultivating the second.

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